

# **JESUS, SIN AND PERFECTION IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY**

Jeffrey S. Siker

2015

**Cambridge University Press**  
New York

**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

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[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781107105416](http://www.cambridge.org/9781107105416)

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First published 2015

Printed in the United States of America

*A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Siker, Jeffrey S.

Jesus, sin, and perfection in early Christianity / by Jeffrey S. Siker.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-107-10541-6 (Hardback : alk. paper)

1. Jesus Christ—Sinlessness—History of doctrines—Early church, ca. 30–600.
2. Perfection—Religious aspects—Christianity—History of doctrines—Early church, ca. 30–600. I. Title.

BT221.S55 2015

232'.8—dc23 2015008977

ISBN 978-1-107-10541-6 Hardback

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## JESUS, SIN, AND PERFECTION IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

This volume is the first full-length study to trace how early Christians came to perceive Jesus as a sinless human being. Jeffrey S. Siker presents a taxonomy of sin in early Judaism and examines moments in Jesus' life associated with sinfulness: his birth to the unwed Mary, his baptism by John the Baptist, his public ministry – transgressing boundaries of family, friends, and faith – and his cursed death by crucifixion. Although followers viewed his immediate death in tragic terms, with no expectation of his resurrection, they quickly came to believe that God had raised him from the dead. Their resurrection faith produced a new understanding of Jesus' prophetic ministry, in which his death had been a perfect sacrificial death for sin, his ministry perfectly obedient, his baptism a demonstration of perfect righteousness, and his birth a perfect virgin birth. This important study explores the implications of a retrospective faith that elevated Jesus to perfect divinity, redefining sin.

JEFFREY S. SIKER is a professor of New Testament and Early Christian Studies at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, California. His publications include *Homosexuality and Religion: An Encyclopedia, Scripture and Ethics: Twentieth-Century Portraits*, *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate*, and *Disinheriting the Jews: Abraham in Early Christian Controversy*.

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## Preface

The idea for this book has been with me for many years. Its basic question is relatively simple: How is it that Jesus came to be viewed as sinless within the Christian tradition? Not just how, but when? And not just when, of course, but what did it mean? Initially it came as a surprise to me that this relatively clear question had not been addressed in any dedicated way. Rather, the sinlessness of Jesus has long been a presupposition, and sacrosanct at that. My goal has been to unravel the answers to this question, both within the earliest Christian sources and across the Christian tradition since then. The notion of a sinless Jesus is completely wrapped up in still larger theological questions about the identity of Jesus and his relationship to God, especially in terms of the understanding of the dual natures of Christ that developed early in the Christian tradition – the paradox that Jesus must be understood as both fully God and fully human. About this conviction, of course, there has been no end of discussion and debate from the very beginnings of Christianity to the present day.

As I have engaged in the long process of researching and writing this book, other convictions have weighed in and are evident in my not uncontroversial conclusions, and those from an author who claims to be Christian. First, I have become convinced that all theology is fundamentally a retrospective undertaking. We cannot step out of our current skins and pretend to approach a topic from other than where we stand. And we certainly cannot step out of our human skins and pretend to have the vantage of God.

Second, I have become convinced that the Christian theological enterprise has ever and again chosen to sacrifice the humanity of Jesus upon the altar of belief in his divinity. Even in the desire to maintain some semblance of balance between the human and divine natures of Jesus, the Christian tradition inevitably stumbles upon the scandal of his humanity, reverting time and again to what in my mind are merely different forms of a docetic

Christ, a Jesus who is mostly human, but then not. And in my view this tendency betrays the true scandal of Christian theology, not letting Jesus be fully human, sin and all. Does a fully human Jesus who made mistakes, could be wrong, and sinned have implications for Christian theology? I should hope so. And yet it is essential that we understand how and why this understanding of Jesus as sinless developed, and developed in the way that it did.

Third, I have become convinced that ontological claims are tricky at best, since all ontological claims are proximate and subject to change – for that is our situation as contingent human beings. Thus, it is imperative that we truly understand the significance of changing creedal pronouncements within the life of the Church and the life of faith. Perhaps we should preface all creedal statements with the clause, “The following is what we currently think, but that will doubtless change . . . so stay tuned.” This does not mean that certain patterns of belief do not get repeated over and over again, for example, the centrality of the cross of Jesus as a revelatory event, or even the conviction that Jesus was sinless. But again, perspective remains paramount. This is not to say that all things are relative. Far from it. But it is to say that even fixed convictions are subject to change and new interpretations.

Finally, I can say that my own sense of faith and belief in a God who is gracious beyond measure has grown and deepened in ways I never would have imagined throughout the process of writing this book. In particular, I have become more deeply attuned to the dynamics of sin and forgiveness, and in particular to our changing understandings of what constitutes sin and why in the varied contexts of our relationships one to another. We truly do see through a glass darkly, and yet we are also truly being transformed from one degree of glory to another through God's grace, even when we neither see nor feel it.

It gives me pleasure to acknowledge here the many ways in which I have experienced such grace in the form of friendships and professional relationships that have contributed to the writing of this book. I give thanks to my colleagues in the Department of Theological Studies, and beyond, at Loyola Marymount University for their encouragement and teasing over the years about my book on Jesus the perfect sinner. My thanks to Laura Morris, Alexandra Poreda, and the readers at Cambridge University Press for their helpful comments and guidance on an earlier draft of the manuscript. I would also like to thank Elizabeth Shand of Cambridge and Jeethu Abraham of SPi Global for their expertise in the production of this book. My friend Bart Ehrman, no stranger to writing controversial books himself, has been extremely helpful in pushing and cajoling me to greater clarity and precision



through his comments. Similarly, Greg Carey's own work on sin in early Christianity (*Sinners: Jesus and His Earliest Followers*, 2009) and his insightful comments on this manuscript have been much appreciated. The Rev. Drs. Paul and Sally Sampley, friends and mentors for many years, have continued to be sources of much joy and revelry, as have our friends the Rev. Drs. Lynn Cheyney and Gary Sattler.

I owe the largest debt of gratitude to my wife, Judy Yates Siker, fellow minister (PCUSA), fellow scholar (PhD in Early Christianity), fellow teacher (at Loyola Marymount University, and previously at the GTU), mother and stepmother to our blended family of five adult children and two grandchildren (all of whom amaze and inspire, each in their own way), and partner/traveler/explorer in all things. Her incisive comments on this manuscript have helped me to keep some perspective. Her encouragement and love have been unceasing. She has been the most profound expression of God's grace to this much less than perfect sinner for these many years, and I pray for all the years to come. I dedicate this book to her as but a token of my deepest thanks and love.

Jeffrey S. Siker  
*Los Angeles, CA*  
*Epiphany, 2015*

## Abbreviations

<i>BBR</i>	<i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i>
<i>BDAG</i>	<i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> , 3rd edition. W. Bauer and F. Danker, eds. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001.
<i>BDB</i>	<i>Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon</i> . Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994.
<i>BR</i>	<i>Bible Review</i>
<i>BS</i>	<i>Bibliotheca Sacra</i>
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
<i>EQ</i>	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
<i>ET</i>	<i>Evangelische Theologie</i>
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>IJST</i>	<i>International Journal of Systematic Theology</i>
<i>ITQ</i>	<i>Irish Theological Quarterly</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JFS</i>	<i>Journal of Feminist Studies</i>
<i>JSHJ</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus</i>
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
<i>JTI</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Interpretation</i>
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
<i>NAB</i>	<i>New American Bible</i>
<i>NIV</i>	<i>New International Version</i>
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
<i>NPNF</i>	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i> , 14 vols. Second series. New York: Christian Literature Company, 1890–1900.
<i>NRSV</i>	<i>New Revised Standard Version</i>
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
<i>QS</i>	<i>The Community Rule (Dead Sea Scrolls)</i>

<i>RestQ</i>	<i>Restoration Quarterly</i>
<i>RQ</i>	<i>Renaissance Quarterly</i>
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
<i>TB</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
<i>TS</i>	<i>Theological Studies</i>
<i>VC</i>	<i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>
<i>ZNW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

## Introduction: From Sin to Perfection

So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, “Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.”

– John 9:24

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.

– Hebrews 4:15

“**W**E KNOW THAT THIS MAN IS A SINNER.” SUCH WAS THE conclusion of some Jewish leaders about Jesus as they sought to make sense of the healing of the man born blind in John 9. Yes, Jesus had healed the man, but Jesus had also violated the Sabbath law in the process. Was he from God, or was he a sinner? How could someone claiming to be from God violate God’s own law? He must be a sinner. This narrative from John 9 fits with other passages in the New Testament where Jesus is viewed as sinful in one way or another. Was he not born in sin out of wedlock? Did he not receive baptism from John, a baptism of repentance for sin? Did he not violate the Jewish law repeatedly during his public ministry? And was he not put to death in the most shameful, sinful, and cursed fashion imaginable? From birth to death, Jesus arguably transgressed into the realm of sin. His opponents could understandably accuse Jesus of leading people astray, of blasphemy, of violating God’s law, of denigrating the Temple, of challenging the teachings of the duly appointed religious authorities, of causing trouble with Rome. A sinner indeed. A sinner in word and deed.

And yet. “We have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.” Such was the conclusion of many early Jewish

Christians<sup>1</sup> reflecting on the life of Jesus as they sought to make sense of one whom they had come to believe was God's messiah, and yet one who had been put to death only to be raised again by God to new life. This was not the kind of messiah they had expected. He was, admittedly, at times a scandalous figure who had challenged the religious leaders. But he taught and healed with authority. And if God had raised him from the dead, then surely he must be the Christ of God, the Son of God, the Son of David, the Son of Man, the Lamb of God, the Word made flesh, the . . . words failed to grasp all that he must be for those who believed that Jesus had come from God and had returned to God. He suffered and died like a man, but God raised him up. He was tested and tempted like us, but he was perfectly righteous to the end, even as he died a sacrificial death on a cross. Therefore God has exalted him. He must be perfectly sinless, like God, for how else could he be raised to sit at the right hand of God in triumph? How else could one account for his powerful words and actions? Why else would God

<sup>1</sup> A brief word about nomenclature and terminology is important here. It has become relatively commonplace, especially in more popular discourse, to speak of "Judaism" and "early Christianity" as if these terms were and are relatively clear. We must avoid the danger of anachronism in presuming that there was a clear distinction between "Judaism" and "Christianity" much before the second or third century CE, namely, any time before Gentile Christianity became the dominant expression of Christian faith. If the correspondence between the Pliny and the emperor Trajan is any indication (Pliny, *Letters* 10.96-97; c. 112 CE), the Roman authorities began to see Christians as a non-Jewish religious sect only near the beginning of the second century CE. During the first couple of generations of Jewish Christians (or Christian Jews) the attitude attributed to Gallio, the Roman governor of the province of Achaia from 51 to 52 CE, was perhaps more typical, as Luke records Gallio's response to non-Christian Jews seeking to charge the Jewish-Christian Paul of violating the Jewish law: "Just as Paul was about to speak, Gallio said to the Jews, 'If it were a matter of crime or serious villainy, I would be justified in accepting the complaint of you Jews; but since it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law, see to it yourselves; I do not wish to be a judge of these matters'" (Acts 18:14-15). This process, this "parting of the ways," took place in different ways at different times in different places. See especially J.D.G. Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways: Between Christianity and Judaism and Their Significance for the Character of Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 1991); S. Wilson, *Related Strangers: Jews and Christians, 70-170 C.E.* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2004); D. Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); and A.H. Becker and A.Y. Reed, eds., *The Ways That Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2007). Dunn locates the basic parting after the Jewish War of 66-70 CE, while Wilson sees the Bar Kochba revolt of 132-135 CE as marking a fundamental break, and both Boyarin and Becker and Reed emphasize ongoing interaction and blurred boundaries between Jews and Christians, especially in late antiquity. See also the extensive discussions in O. Skarsaune and R. Hvalvik, eds., *Jewish Believers in Jesus: The Early Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), and M. Jackson-McCabe, ed., *Jewish Christianity Reconsidered: Rethinking Ancient Groups and Texts* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2007).

redeem him in so dramatic a fashion? Surely he must have divine origins. Sinless indeed. Perfect in deed and word.

So begins our exploration of how Jesus came to be viewed as perfectly sinless in early Christianity. Why did opponents of Jesus accuse him of being a sinner? What did they mean with this charge? How did the early followers of Jesus come to believe that in fact Jesus was sinless, a perfect embodiment of God in the flesh? What did they mean by their claims that Jesus was like us in every way, yet without sin? The purpose of this book is to examine and to answer these questions, questions that quite simply have not been addressed before in any in-depth manner.<sup>2</sup> Simply put, how did Jesus come to be viewed as sinless? Put more complexly, can we trace the process by which Jesus went from sinful transgressor to perfectly divine sacrifice for human sin? To describe this progression is to show how Jesus went from scandalous human prophet to perfect divine envoy. As this book unfolds, we will see the various ways in which Jesus the transgressor yields to Jesus the sinless, how Jesus as the friend of sinners becomes the perfect expression of the link between human and divine, and how Jesus the lawbreaker becomes the embodiment of righteous obedience on the path to God. This is paradoxically both a unique path and yet an exemplary path. But paradox certainly defines how Christians came to speak of Jesus in the formative period of Christian faith, fully human and fully divine, a paradoxical mystery that remains with us to the present day.

<sup>2</sup> Surprisingly scant literature exists on the sinlessness of Jesus in early Christianity. Most of what has been written addresses the topic from the stance of dogmatic theology, typically presuming the sinlessness of Jesus as a theological given. Scholars have perhaps understandably been reluctant to discuss how Jesus came to be viewed as sinless, since even to pose the question might be seen as implying that Jesus was less than perfect and hence less than divine. The only major work on the sinlessness of Jesus is the nineteenth-century apologetic study by C. Ullmann (d. 1865), *Die sündlosigkeit Jesu. Eine apologetische betrachtung*, published originally in a shorter form in the series *Studien und Kritiken* in 1828, then as a book in 1846 (Friedrich Perthes). It went on to become a popular book, going through seven editions (the final edition in 1863), and was translated into English in 1870 as *The Sinlessness of Jesus: An Evidence for Christianity* (trans. S. Taylor, Edinburgh: T&T Clark). Much more recently, G. Carey offers a brief “Interlude” on “The Sinless Jesus?” in his book *Sinners: Jesus and His Earliest Followers* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), 97–105, where he raises the problem of discussing moral growth in the human Jesus. There are also several shorter articles that will enter into our discussion along the way. G. Anderson’s book, *Sin: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), provides an important discussion of shifts in the development of metaphors for sin from that of burden to that of debt, but does not directly address the question of the sinlessness of Jesus. P. Fredricksen’s *Sin: The Early History of an Idea* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012) traces early Christian understandings of sin and atonement primarily from the second through the fifth centuries, including attention to the attitudes of Jesus and Paul toward sin.

In the chapters that follow we will undertake a journey into the emerging worlds of early Christianity in its Jewish and Greco-Roman contexts. These worlds were anything but neat and orderly. Like life today, these worlds were messy and complicated, full of tensions and compromises amid firm convictions about God. The Jewish world was characterized by a dynamic and vigorous conversation among competing religious groups and leaders, all of them passionate about the will of God for God's people. It was onto this stage that Jesus emerged as a small-town Galilean prophet who aligned himself first with the fiery and charismatic John the Baptist, a preacher of repentance. But did this include repentance also for Jesus? It was in this setting that Jesus launched his own public ministry, gathering followers, associating with figures of scandal and sin – tax collectors, prostitutes, the mentally ill, criminals, and poor uneducated fishermen. If he had come to seek out the lost, he had certainly found the right people, even if it offended the religious authorities of the status quo. Was Jesus also offending God? As Jesus pressed on in his ministry, criticizing not only the religious leaders but the operation of the Jerusalem Temple itself, he became a pesky threat in the eyes of the Romans charged with maintaining civic order, and it grew clearer that the most expedient way to deal with this wayward prophet was to arrest him and make an example of him. Execute him. And so they did. Had God actually forsaken him?

With Jesus crucified, dead, and buried, it seemed that this was the end of the short-lived story of Jesus. Such was certainly the conviction of those who sought his demise. And how could his followers disagree? He was dead and gone. The account from Luke 24 of the disciples on the road to Emmaus shows this attitude clearly enough. Luke 24:13–32 provides us with the only window we have onto the world of the disciples after the death of Jesus, but before they came to believe in his resurrection from the dead. It is a remarkable scene. Two disciples were walking on the road to Emmaus, a village not far from Jerusalem. A stranger joined them and accompanied them on the way. The omniscient reader knows that this is no stranger, but the risen Jesus. The disciples in the story, however, are kept from recognizing him. The hiddenness of the risen Jesus will make his self-revelation all the more astonishing at the end of the story. He asks them what they are discussing, and they express surprise that he seems unaware of the events that have just transpired. “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” (24:18). And when this risen Jesus plays dumb, and asks “What things?,” their response is most telling.

They replied, “The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.” (Luke 24:19–21)

They dutifully report the tragic crucifixion of Jesus. But they also express what they *had hoped* before he was put to death. They *had hoped* that Jesus was the one to redeem Israel, to restore Israel to its former glory, to usher in the kingdom of God that would reverse the sad state of affairs under Roman occupation. They *had hoped* that this mighty prophet would bring redemption to the people of God. But they no longer hoped for this. He had been put to death. Their hopes had died with him on the cross. The last thing they expected was his being raised from the dead, especially in light of the horrible and definitive way in which the Romans had put him to death. The only sense they could make of his death was in tragic terms. Another prophet had come, and another prophet had died. Another Jewish hope had been dashed.

Out of this somber scene, of course, Luke crafts a dramatic revelation of the risen Jesus to these two disciples. Jesus shifts from playing one who knew nothing about what had taken place to one who now knows everything about these events, including their significance in light of the Jewish scriptures. And so the risen Jesus enlightens them with what the early Christians eventually came to believe. “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” (Luke 24:25–26). This is a remarkable statement that Luke has put on the lips of the risen Jesus. The immediate appeal is to the Jewish scriptures and their interpretation, and not just any interpretation, but a radically new interpretation. Was it not indeed necessary for the messiah to suffer, die, and be raised from the dead? The answer, of course, is “No!” The only thing that made this course of events “necessary” was because these were the events that actually unfolded. All that was truly necessary, from the perspective of the two disciples, was that as the messiah Jesus would redeem Israel. And that did not include his death! But die he did, and so in light of the resurrection the early Christians had to make sense of this promising life and senseless death. They had to find meaning in a death that appeared to be filled only with the meaning of broken hopes and dreams.

Renewed meaning comes for the disciples only in light of resurrection (see John 20:9; 1 Cor. 15:14). When the risen Jesus breaks bread with the



two disciples, they recognize him, and he vanishes from their sight. Had this been real? Had this actually happened to them? Their experience is self-confirming: “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” (Luke 24:32). The risen Jesus had now restored their hope and rekindled their faith that the kingdom would not be far off. At the beginning of Luke’s second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, the disciples even press the risen Jesus on when all these wonderful things will take place. It is the first thing the disciples ask him about when he appears to them: “Lord, is this the time that you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). Far from a failed prophet, Jesus turns out to be a crucified and risen prophet in whom God has prevailed over death itself. As for the timing of the restoration of the kingdom? – all in God’s good time: “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority” (Acts 1:7). Why did Jesus have to die? For Luke, in retrospect Jesus died in order to fulfill scripture. He died so that he could be raised from the dead. Why did he have to die? Because, in fact, he died.

The death of Jesus became the fulcrum for all subsequent Christian theology as people of faith would wrestle and struggle with the meaning and significance of his death in light of his resurrection. This was so for the earliest Christians, and it remains the case today. As we will see in the chapters that follow, one of the most important ways in which the earliest Christians came to understand the death of Jesus was in terms of an atoning sacrificial death for sin and for sinners. This was not the only way to appropriate the meaning of Jesus’ death. Luke and Paul, for example, could understand his death in other ways as well.<sup>3</sup> But the notion of Jesus as an unblemished sacrifice to atone for human sinfulness made sense to the earliest Jewish Christians, who were well aware of the sacrificial imagery associated with the Jerusalem Temple. Thus, it is no real surprise to find Paul referring to Jesus as “our Passover sacrifice” (1 Cor. 5:7), the Gospel of John having John the Baptist bear witness to Jesus as “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29), or the Epistle to the Hebrews envisioning Jesus as the high priest who offers

<sup>3</sup> Scholarship on the death of Jesus is, of course, immense. For a fundamental orientation to the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ death, see R. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave*, 2 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1994). See also J. Carroll and J. Green, eds., *The Death of Jesus in Early Christianity* (Peabody, MA: Hendricksen, 1995); S. Patterson, *Beyond the Passion: Rethinking the Death and Life of Jesus* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2004); and S. McKnight, *Jesus and His Death: Historiography, the Historical Jesus, and Atonement Theory* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2005).

himself up as a perfect sacrifice (Heb. 4:14–5:4). From this perspective of a crucified and risen Jesus, his death could be efficacious because he was sinless.

This understanding of Jesus as sinless was retrojected back on Jesus' death, life, baptism, and birth, all in light of belief in the resurrection. In the chapters that follow we will trace this process of "perfecting" Jesus, turning this "sinful" prophet (at least in the eyes of many in his day) into a "sinless" human being, indeed a divine human, the Son of God. We will also explore some questions that arise in our own contemporary appropriations of this conviction so central to Christian theology. Can Jesus be truly fully human if he does not experience human sinfulness himself? Despite what the Gospels tell us, can he, in fact, be like us in every respect if he does not know shame or guilt or forgiveness in his own life? Or to put the question another way, does a truly human Jesus need to be saved from perfection? Might the perfection and sinlessness of Jesus be better understood as metaphors rather than as ontological statements that allow him to be co-eternal with God as the second member of the Trinity? If we want to continue to use the language of perfection, what might the notion of Jesus as a transgressor teach us about his identity as a Son of God?

We will begin our exploration in the next chapter by clearing some ground and discussing how we approach the New Testament traditions, and especially the Gospels, in a way that is open to both faith and critical scholarship. These approaches to the Gospels in terms of historical critique are commonplace among scholars, but remain not widely understood among nonspecialists. My hope in this chapter is to make clear some of my own critical presumptions from the outset.

I will then turn my attention to a discussion of the meanings of "sin" and "perfection" in the early Christian worlds. A taxonomy of these terms involves more than word studies. Rather, it involves "world studies." What kind of moral worlds do terms associated with sin and perfection evoke? How do the Jewish and Greco-Roman contexts of earliest Christianity help to shape our understanding? What ranges of meaning were invoked when someone was called a sinner (as Jesus was in John 9) or when someone claimed to be blameless (as Paul claimed for himself in Philippians 3)? This taxonomy will help to set the context for understanding the claims and counterclaims made about Jesus in regard to sin and perfection.

The heart of the book (Chapters 4–9) examines what, for lack of a better term, I would label as four "moments" in the life of Jesus. We will

focus on his birth, baptism, ministry, and death. Clearly, the birth, baptism, and death of Jesus are far more “moments” than is the public ministry of Jesus. What stands out for me in each of these moments is how Jesus could be viewed as both sinner and sinless. In the birth story of Jesus we find clear evidence of scandal in connection with his birth. Even Joseph believed Mary had acted immorally, and so he sought to divorce her (Matt. 1:19). Yet in early Christian theology the birth becomes the signal moment of Jesus’ divine identity, a virgin birth. Similarly, the baptism story shows Jesus going to be baptized by John the Baptist, who was openly baptizing people for repentance of sins (Mark 1:4). Why, then, was Jesus getting baptized? We will see that while Mark reports the baptism in a fairly straightforward manner, the other Gospels dance around this potentially embarrassing episode. In the end the baptism of Jesus will show him fulfilling all righteousness by the time the evangelists are done with the story.

The public ministry of Jesus will occupy us for three chapters, as we pay attention to scandals of his ministry in relation to family, friends, and faith. Jesus broke social norms in relation to family responsibilities. He associated with the wrong kinds of friends. His understanding of the Jewish faith caused the religious leaders to seek his death. And yet for his earliest followers Jesus in fact redefines family, friends, and faith in radical terms. Indeed, Jesus ends up redefining sin itself in the process. Jesus appears here as sinfully perfect, or as a faithful transgressor.

The last “moment” concerns the death of Jesus. The death of Jesus was a tragic event for his followers. The opponents of Jesus no doubt felt some degree of vindication on his execution. This would-be prophet who was leading the people astray had finally been dealt with in the most severe manner possible. God’s judgment had finally been meted out through the hands of Roman justice. All that could be done by the followers of Jesus was to wring their hands and wonder at what might have been had he not died. They had hoped he would redeem Israel, but such hopes were now crushed. They viewed him as a righteous martyr, one who was wrongly put to death. But perfect? Sinless? No such language had ever left their lips. He was a man, flesh and blood, like them. But he was a man with a deep and vital connection to God; he was a righteous man. They experienced him as a man who led them to see and experience God in new ways. And now all they had were memories of his dynamic teachings and actions.

All of these “moments” take on a radical new look in light of the resurrection faith that bursts suddenly on the scene a few days after the

death of Jesus. His followers had thought he was dead and gone, but now they believed him to be raised from the dead by God, vindicated, alive, and now sitting on the right hand of God preparing the heavenly realm for them, preparing to usher in the ultimate kingdom of God. This belief forced a complete reevaluation of his death, his ministry, his baptism, and his birth. And so the followers of Jesus began to tell a new story, a story of one who was born in scandal to save his people from their sins; a story of one who was baptized with water who would in turn baptize with the Spirit; a story of one who violated the beliefs and practices of the religious leaders of the day, one who would challenge notions of sin and perfection; a story of one whose way of life resulted in his sudden death by crucifixion, a life now vindicated by God in the resurrection, at least for those who would come to believe it.

Such are the moments we will explore in the pages that follow. And at the end of this study we will need to consider some difficult questions. Can Jesus be truly human apart from the experience of sin? What does it even mean to talk about Jesus as sinless? Did he have the capacity to sin? If not, then how is his humanity like ours? Must the human Jesus ever be sacrificed anew upon the altar of the divine Jesus? What might it mean to recover the transgressive Jesus for the twenty-first century? Does Jesus need to be saved from perfection in order to be fully human? Or does Jesus exemplify human perfection, and if so, how? Is such perfection attainable in this life?<sup>4</sup> How are people of the twenty-first century to make sense of the ontological claims made about Jesus by Christians from centuries gone by, especially claims that ossified Jesus into a perfect incarnation of the

<sup>4</sup> From the earliest Christian writers onward we find language addressing movement toward perfection and divinization in the Christian life. Already the Apostle Paul can say that “all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor. 3:18), and the celebrated passage from 2 Peter 1:4 states, “Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature.” Such language of participating in the divine nature and attaining human perfection can be found especially in the traditions of Eastern Christianity, but also notably in the traditions associated with John Wesley, who taught the doctrine of Christian perfection in this life. See, e.g., N. Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); M. Christensen and J. Wittung, eds., *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007); V. Kharlamov, ed., *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology*, 2 vols. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2006–2011); J. Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (London: Epworth Press, 1968; originally published in 1777); and S. Tomkins, “Perfection,” in *John Wesley: A Biography* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 156–164.

divine? Did Jesus bear the *imago dei* (the image of God) in ways fundamentally different from us? To what degree has Christian tradition sanitized the life of Jesus, so that he ends up being portrayed as devoid of the foibles and faults that make us human? In short, what does it mean for us to understand sin and redemption in the Christian tradition in view of Jesus the perfect sinner?<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The nineteenth-century Scottish theologian J.M. Campbell saw Jesus as providing a “perfect repentance” vicariously on behalf of humanity because of his own vicarious humanity on behalf of God. In his view Jesus gave “a perfect confession of our sins” that resulted in atonement for humanity. See his *The Nature of the Atonement* (London: Macmillan, 1867), 136. Similarly, at the beginning of the twentieth century, R.C. Moberly described Jesus as “the perfect penitent,” whose vicarious humanity, life of sacrifice, and perfect obedience to God even in death was atoning. See his *Atonement and Personality* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1901), 99, 117. For both theologians Jesus could be a perfect penitent only because he was a sinless sinner. C.S. Lewis borrowed Moberly’s language of “The Perfect Penitent” in his *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 56–61. See C.D. Kettler, “The Vicarious Repentance of Christ in the Theology John McLeod Campbell and R.C. Moberly,” *SJT* 38:4 (1985): 529–543.

## Approaching the Gospels

THE PURPOSE OF THIS CHAPTER IS TO NEGOTIATE SOME PRELIMINARY issues that typically arise when studying Jesus in the context of earliest Christianity. The primary sources for any discussion of Jesus are, of course, the Gospel traditions found in the New Testament. These are not the only sources, but they remain our best and earliest sources.<sup>1</sup> To understand the nature of the Gospel traditions better some initial comments will help provide an orientation to the Gospels and how they function as source material. These comments will also make clear my own presuppositions in approaching the Gospel texts. Let me be forthright about my own understanding of the Bible as a whole in this regard. The more I read and study the Bible, the more I have come to believe that I am both overhearing and having a conversation with the biblical authors about what God is doing and where God's Spirit is leading. In my view Scripture will always be human words about God. This is simply the nature of language.<sup>2</sup> We communicate with words embedded in a particular grammar within a language. And yet as a believing Christian I also am convinced that God's Spirit does in fact speak to us both individually and communally through these human words, through these stories and traditions in Scripture, and

<sup>1</sup> Other ancient sources outside of the canonical New Testament remain important reflections of the diversity of early Christianity as it developed over the course of the first few centuries: e.g., the Coptic Gospel of Thomas, the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Peter, and the Gospel of Philip, among others. See, e.g., R. van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament: An Introduction to the Ancient Evidence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> See the discussion by S. Schneiders in *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999). On the role of metaphor, see especially the seminal work of G. Lakoff and M. Johnson, *Metaphors We Live by*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003), and J. M. Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

through reflections on Scripture. At least that is my experience and my conviction. The stories and traditions move in many different directions, and as a result we all appeal to different passages as warrants for different beliefs and actions as representing a faithful response to God. In my view we have little choice but to be honest about such differences and, as Paul put it so well, confess that we see through a glass darkly in this life (1 Cor. 13:12). Still, to appeal to another Pauline motif, I remain hopeful that in faith we can move from one “degree of glory” to another as we strive to discern the leading of God’s Spirit (2 Cor. 3:18). I hasten to add that although I consider myself to be a Christian, I do not presume any particular confessional stance on the part of the reader. The following considerations are, I would argue, important aspects for all readers approaching the Gospels. I will presume the validity of these considerations as we move into the substance of exploring how Jesus came to be viewed as sinless.

#### WINDOWS AND MIRRORS

When we read the Gospels we need to be self-conscious about two aspects from the start. The first has to do with how we typically approach the Gospels, namely, as windows onto the world of Jesus. From this perspective we often read the Gospels as simply describing what Jesus actually said and did historically. Thus the Gospels serve as windows onto the life of Jesus in the first third of the first century CE. Even though there is a scholarly consensus that the Gospels were written in the latter third of the first century, it is commonplace to read them as simple narrations of the events that took place. This approach is especially the case within the church community. There is certainly a spectrum of perspectives about just how historically faithful these accounts are, ranging from the belief that they represent verbatim eyewitness accounts to the conviction that they faithfully recount at the very least the substance and gist of Jesus’ sayings and actions, even though the Gospel writers engaged in some degree of editorial activity. From this general perspective the Gospels provide relatively clear windows onto the life of Jesus.

But there is another way in which we can and also need to read and understand the Gospels. For while the Gospels do indeed provide some windows onto the life and ministry of Jesus, the Gospels also reflect the worlds of the Gospel writers during the latter part of the first century. Thus the Gospels are not merely windows; they are also *mirrors* that reflect the images of the authors and communities responsible for composing and

handing on the Gospels themselves.<sup>3</sup> In this way the Gospels reflect something of what was going on for Christians from the second and third generations of Christianity, namely, from the 60s to 90s of the first century CE. As the Gospel writers composed their accounts of Jesus, they wrote their own issues and concerns into the narratives, resonating more with some aspects of Jesus' teachings than others. They not only narrate the world and life of Jesus, but also construct it in ways that reflect their own worlds and lives as well. The task of the reader today is to be aware of these dynamics at work in each Gospel account. Thus, the Gospels are both windows onto the world of Jesus and mirrors reflecting back on the situation and concerns of those who wrote the Gospels.<sup>4</sup> We should not expect that it would be otherwise.

But it is not just that the reader sees the world of Jesus through the window of the Gospel, or that the reader sees the world of the Gospel writer through the mirror of the Gospel. It is not a one-way street of reading. At least for the community of faith the Gospel affects, shapes, and itself helps to construct the world of the reader.<sup>5</sup> Thus, there are a whole series of conversations that take place: between the reader and the narrative world created by the author, between the reader and the author's actual world, and between the world of the story and the author, as overheard by the reader. Add to this the entire history of biblical interpretation and you have quite a few conversations going on indeed.<sup>6</sup>

### THE HISTORY OF TRADITIONS

The Gospels contain not only the story about Jesus and vestiges of the Gospel writers embedded in the text. These may be the outer poles of the Gospel traditions, but they do not represent the entire spectrum of traditions. Indeed, as the author of Luke's Gospel tells us (see Luke 1:1–4), he has

<sup>3</sup> See J. L. Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), and R.E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist, 1979). Some scholars have rejected the basic premise of Martyn and Brown and have argued instead for a more unified understanding of John's Gospel, an argument I find unpersuasive. See, e.g., R. Bauckham, *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History, and Theology in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> One colleague put it well in response to a student who asked if the Gospel accounts were true. He answered, "Yes, they're true, and some of them even happened!"

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., S. Fowl and L. G. Jones, *Reading in Communion* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1998), and H. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974).

<sup>6</sup> Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, 97–179.



been following all things closely for some time now, particularly other written traditions and oral reports about the life and ministry of Jesus. Although Luke himself is not an eyewitness, he has relied on written and oral accounts from what he considers reliable sources. This report by Luke serves as a good springboard for understanding how the traditions about Jesus were handed down. Understanding this process of tradition is important to the larger task of this book, as we will get some glimpses of how various layers of the interpretive tradition dealt with Jesus' life, death, and resurrection in rather different ways – from the birth stories to Jesus' baptism, his ministry, and especially his death (and resurrection). As we will see, reflection on each of these stages of Jesus' life contributes directly to how Jesus came to be viewed over time as sinless, particularly in light of his death.

The history of traditions moves from an originating event through oral tradition to written tradition to a process of editing to (in our case) a final literary Gospel, and then progresses to copying and translation.<sup>7</sup> Interpretation necessarily enters the process at each stage of transmission. Further, oral traditions continue to be passed down even after written traditions develop. An interplay between all these layers of traditions continues.

Sometimes the originating event is not what Jesus did or said historically, but what someone remembers, thinks, or has heard that Jesus did or said. Or an author records what he thinks Jesus should or would have done or said. The lack of video-replay makes this a difficult process to demonstrate. Scholars disagree about what really happened and how we know what happened. They also disagree about historical method, the value of different sources, and how collective memory functions.<sup>8</sup> In the end, then, when it comes to historical reliability we are left with varying degrees of probability. Determining what most likely occurred becomes even more tenuous when we try to address the probability of improbable events, such

<sup>7</sup> I subscribe to the scholarly consensus that Matthew and Luke used Mark as a literary source and that they also used another written source, "Q" – primarily sayings of Jesus found in both Matthew and Luke, but not in Mark.

<sup>8</sup> Compare, e.g., R.E. Brown's *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), which treats the topic of the historical Jesus in a relatively brief appendix, with J. Meier's four-volume work *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991–2009). On the role of collective memory, see J.D.G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), along with a discussion of his proposals in *Memories of Jesus*, R.B. Stewart and G. Habermas, eds. (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2010); and D. Allison, *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010).

as miracles.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the most important aspects of Christian belief, that Jesus' teachings were accompanied by the performance of mighty works and that God raised him from the dead, are simply not subject to the methods of historical reconstruction, which depends on comparing similar events. Of the writing of books about the historical Jesus there will surely be no end, but that is not my primary concern. My main point here is the simple observation that the followers of Jesus who handed on traditions about him were constantly engaged in a process of theologizing and retheologizing the stories about and sayings of Jesus as they molded them to address their own contemporary audiences.

To sum up this consideration of the history of traditions, the process of interpreting the significance of Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection went through a long series of developments within the Christian tradition that is still unfolding. Whereas some first-century Jewish leaders viewed the death of Jesus as just punishment for one who led the people astray (e.g., John 10:33; 11:49–50), some followers of Jesus viewed his death as the tragic end of another prophetic figure sent from God (see Luke 24:19–21). They were forced to reinterpret his death when they came to believe that God had raised him from the dead. Perhaps he died as a righteous martyr, vindicated by God. Perhaps he died as a sacrificial lamb – a sacrifice of atonement accepted by God. Perhaps he died to save people from their sins (already implicit in Matthew's birth narrative, 1:21). Perhaps God sent him for the very purpose of dying for the sins of others. Perhaps only because he was sinless could he take on the sins of the world and bring redemption through his death and resurrection (so Heb. 4:15; 5:8–9). Such is the process of what we might call *retrospective theologizing* – making sense of past events in light of present experiences.

It is helpful to think of these various layers in accordion fashion, or even as a kind of archaeological dig. As scholars we do our best to separate out one layer of tradition from another, to isolate the stages of a tradition to see how it grew and changed before becoming fixed in at least the final written form of the Gospel texts. And while we may want to excavate the Gospel stories to get back to the originating event itself, that process is not so easy. For although the tradition began with an originating event, we begin at the very end of the process of tradition, 2,000 years down the road, seeking to

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., B. Ehrman's caveats about historians commenting on miraculous stories: *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 21–40. See also E.P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (New York: Penguin Press, 1993), 132–168.

work our way back through the many layers of tradition. Historians of early Christianity have long debated the degree to which it is even possible to work successfully back through the layers with any confidence that we can identify what was going on at any given point in the process, let alone getting back to the historical Jesus himself. This observation leads us to another preliminary consideration.

### HISTORY AND FAITH

The initial quest for the historical Jesus<sup>10</sup> developed in part as a response to the Enlightenment emphasis on the capacity of human reason to create, construct, and verify truth apart from the Church. Among scholars there is still a significant desire to investigate Christian origins without having to bow in the direction of the Church (any church) and its official doctrine. Still, some of the more significant recent treatments of the historical Jesus have come from scholars who clearly identify with the tradition of the church, be it Roman Catholic (John Meier), Anglican (Tom Wright),<sup>11</sup> or Church of Scotland/Methodist (James Dunn),<sup>12</sup> among others. Each of these scholars places himself squarely within the tradition of the church and not over against it. And so the debate among historical Jesus scholars rages on.

But this leads to a second point regarding the continued strong interest in the quest for the historical Jesus. While the independent inquiry of scholars is certainly important, I think there are also deep theological motivations at work that underlie the ongoing quest. For if the historical Jesus matters to the life of faith, then the ability to reconstruct who Jesus was with some degree of historical certainty (or at least probability) creates a Jesus who can serve as a measuring stick for other claims about Jesus, whether by the church or by scholars outside the church. Whether investigated by historians who count themselves among the faithful or by historians who count themselves as skeptics about the entire Christian story, each reconstruction of Jesus serves as a yardstick, a measure of sorts, against which claims about Jesus can be judged and are judged, as if the changing views of scholars could ever provide such clarity.

<sup>10</sup> See the still monumental work of A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1961; originally published in 1906; 1st English translation, 1910).

<sup>11</sup> N.T. Wright, *Simply Jesus: A New Vision of Who He Was, What He Did, and Why He Matters* (New York: HarperOne, 2011).

<sup>12</sup> Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*.

In the end, the quest for the historical Jesus is both significant and irrelevant for tracing how Jesus came to be viewed as sinless. On the one hand the reconstruction of the historical Jesus matters tremendously because the specificity of his identity does provide important contours for understanding his conflicts with religious leaders of his day. At the very least we can establish with a strong degree of historical probability that Jesus was viewed as one who transgressed the boundaries of appropriate behavior in relationship to Jewish faith and Jewish law. Thus the historicity of the Sabbath violations, for example, or Jesus' critique of the Temple cult, become important barometers for understanding something about the conflicts surrounding Jesus that ultimately led to his death. The conviction of some Pharisees in John 9 that Jesus was a "sinner" because he broke the Sabbath reflects not only a theological judgment but a historical one as well, if not in the time of Jesus, then at least in the time of the fourth evangelist toward the end of the first century CE. On the other hand, the quest for the historical Jesus is, in the end, irrelevant and superfluous for my investigation because we are dealing primarily with the theological reappropriations of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus from the perspective of early Christian faith. From this vantage Jesus may have been a transgressor of boundaries, but in doing so – from the perspective of Christian faith – not only did he *not* sin, he established new boundaries for defining both sin and perfection. If violating the Sabbath to heal someone not facing a life-threatening illness had been a transgression for the rabbis, for Jesus it was the failure to help a person in distress on the Sabbath that became the newly defined transgression (see, e.g., Mark 3:1–6). To anticipate something of what we will find when we explore the sinlessness of Jesus in relation to his public ministry, we see that in Christian theological reflection Jesus engaged in the process of redefining sin and righteousness. Thus, historical reconstruction provides significant contexts primarily for theological purposes and theological claims, all construed in retrospect.

Partly because we are historical creatures ourselves with a strong sense of historical consciousness, I am convinced that we will always in some way be questing for the historical Jesus, even though historians never really arrive at more than approximations of potentials and probabilities. (Jesus was, after all, a historical figure.<sup>13</sup>) Such outcomes are never enough, but they are suggestive and of interest to believers as they seek to imagine what an

<sup>13</sup> Although he is skeptical about various aspects of the New Testament, B. Ehrman's demonstration that Jesus actually existed is difficult to refute: *Did Jesus Exist?: The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2012).

embodied faith might look like in the contemporary world. The historian tends to hold the believer's feet to the ground, and the believer often nudges the historian to be more than antiquarian. It is not that historians who are also believers (or believers who are also historians) must live bifurcated lives; far from it. Faith has historical roots, and history has a strong impact on faith convictions, just as these same faith convictions have a significant effect on how history is remembered and told.<sup>14</sup> This leads us to a brief, but important, discussion of biblical hermeneutics, and especially the shift from first to second naïveté.

#### FROM FIRST TO SECOND NAÏVETÉ

In his seminal book, *The Symbolism of Evil*<sup>15</sup> the French philosopher/theologian Paul Ricoeur discusses the process of moving from a first naïveté, through critical awareness, to a second naïveté. "First naïveté" refers to an innocent reading of a story, taking it at face value. For example, children accept the story of Santa Claus as simply truthful (my example, not Ricoeur's). This is the immediacy of belief. At Christmastime, in the American version, Santa flies around the world in a sled powered by reindeer and he delivers gifts to children, which they discover under a Christmas tree the next morning.<sup>16</sup> Children accept this story at face value, as magical as it appears. But as children mature they gain a critical awareness that leads them to the realization that the story of Santa Claus is not literally true in any sense of the word. After all, children do not see old Saint Nick coming down through the chimney, nor do they hear the clattering of reindeer on a rooftop. This process of gaining critical awareness can include moments of confusion and feelings of disillusion as children come to realize that the adult world is in on the secret that there is no literal Santa Claus. In many respects this process is parallel to moving from an understanding of the Gospels as mere windows onto the world of Jesus to a critical understanding of the Gospels as also mirrors reflecting the worlds of the Gospel writers. But a second naïveté involves more than just the critical awareness that the Gospels went through a complicated history of transmission and redaction.

<sup>14</sup> See V. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer: The Morality of Historical Knowledge and Christian Belief* (New York: Macmillan, 1966).

<sup>15</sup> New York: Harper & Row, 1967; 350–352.

<sup>16</sup> The variation in the telling of the story of Santa Claus largely divides along lines of national identity. For a range of different national stories about St. Nicholas, see L. Carus, ed. and trans., *The Real St. Nicholas: Tales of Generosity and Hope from around the World* (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 2002).

As Ricoeur puts it, we can “aim at a second naïveté in and through criticism; . . . it is by *interpreting* that we can *hear* again.”<sup>17</sup> This process involves a kind of recovery of critical innocence and a renewed appreciation of the deeper truth of a story beyond its mere historical facticity. To borrow again from the story of Santa Claus, it is no accident that adults continue to tell their children the story of Santa Claus, even though as adults they know it is not truthful at a simple historical level. Parents and other relatives continue to tell and enact the story of Santa Claus precisely because of the world it invokes and the deeper truths it contains about giving and receiving.

In relation to the Gospel accounts, a second naïveté involves a renewed understanding of the power of the story while at the same time having the critical awareness that the Gospel stories have been constructed by different groups of Christians toward the end of the first century, each with their own theological concerns. Some would call this a mature rather than childish faith.<sup>18</sup> This critical awareness has not done away with the religious significance of the biblical narratives. A second naïveté often takes shape whereby the story narrated in the Bible remains a sacred story about God and a people of faith. Even with its contradictions and historical problems, even with this critical awareness, these imperfect texts continue to bear witness to the story of God with humanity. The stories retain the power to transform.

My goal in this study is to gain a critical understanding of how Jesus came to be viewed as sinless, and at the same time to ask how this understanding might lead to deeper theological understandings, to a new appreciation of what we mean by sin and perfection. What might we learn through critical analysis in a shift from the first naïveté of a simple belief that Jesus was sinless to a second naïveté that considers what sinlessness or perfection might mean, especially for a faith filled with religious metaphors?

One further dimension of the shift from first naïveté to second naïveté stands out in regard to historical narrative. This aspect involves the relationship between the facticity of historical events and the truth of historical events. On one level we can talk about the brute facts of an event itself.

<sup>17</sup> *The Symbolism of Evil*, 351; emphasis in original. He states further that “the second immediacy that we seek and the second naïveté that we await are no longer accessible to us anywhere else than in a hermeneutics; we can believe only by interpreting . . . This second naïveté aims to be the postcritical equivalent of the precritical hierophany” (p. 352).

<sup>18</sup> In the documentary *For the Bible Tells Me So* (D. Karlslake, Director/Producer, 2007), Dr. L. Keen (a Disciples of Christ minister) puts the matter bluntly in relation to precritical and postcritical approaches to God: “There’s nothing wrong with a fifth-grade understanding of God, as long as you’re in the fifth grade.” One could say the same in regard to the contrast between approaching the Bible from a precritical naïveté and approaching the Bible from a postcritical naïveté.

Beyond this, however, stands the meaning of an event. Different people might agree about the brute facts, of course, but strongly disagree about the meaning or truth claims associated with an event. A further possibility is that the sheer facticity of historical events can be falsely represented, at least to a significant degree, even intentionally so, and yet the truthfulness or meaning of the events can remain.<sup>19</sup>

This notion of having to create a fiction in order to represent something truthful applies directly to the Gospel traditions as well. It is not that the Gospels are fictions; rather, in order to communicate the story of Jesus as they desired, as they believed it to be, the Gospel writers by necessity created many scenes and discourses that likely never happened, at least not as simple narrated facts. But the creation of such “fictive truth” is not to be viewed as dishonest or playing fast and loose with the facts. Rather, such creations are essential to the very production of a truthful story. Thus, part of the shift from first naïveté to second naïveté involves a critical awareness and understanding of the function of “fictive truth” when we discuss the Gospel portraits of Jesus.

#### CONTEXT AND PERSPECTIVE

One of the most important contributions of all historical-critical study of the Bible is the deep appreciation such study has instilled for the importance of context: historical context, social context, linguistic context, political context, religious context, economic context, literary context, philosophical context, geographic context – the list goes on. These contexts apply, of course, not only to the world behind the text, but also to the world of the interpreter of the text. Thus at its most fundamental level interpretation involves a series of contextual conversations, translations, and imaginations. It is not too much to say that context is everything. For there is no meaning apart from a context in which meaning is housed. The first task of the interpreter is to

<sup>19</sup> See the compelling “true story” of Homer Hickam, a West Virginia coal miner’s son who went on to become a NASA rocket scientist. His autobiography *Rocket Boys: A Memoir* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1998) was made into a successful 1999 movie entitled *October Sky*. In a National Public Radio interview about the relationship between his book and the film Hickam was asked if anything surprised him about the transition from the page to the screen. He responded that he was most surprised by how much the film had to lie in order to tell the truth about his life. Namely, there was not room in the film version for all the details in his book. And so various separate characters from his book had to be combined into composite characters for the film, and certain details changed. Thus, to tell his story truthfully the film version actually had to create certain fictions in order to be faithful to the spirit of his autobiography.

understand and explore the whole range of contexts that are presented in any text. This applies to the Gospels and the story of Jesus no less than it does to any other piece of literature or narrative.

When we look at the contextual worlds that comprise the Gospel portraits of Jesus we become immediately aware that different contextual configurations produce somewhat different portraits of Jesus. Thus, a context where the faithful are enduring significant suffering can result in a Gospel (Mark) that highlights the redemptive suffering of Jesus. Similarly, a context where the faithful are trying to show connections with their Jewish heritage can result in a Gospel (Matthew) that highlights Jesus with a heritage that can be traced back to Abraham, with Jesus as a new Moses, a new David, indeed, a fulfillment of the Jewish scriptures. These same contextual worlds can produce an apocalypse with the imagery of a bloody lamb leading the faithful to victory over the forces of darkness (Revelation). Or worries about backsliding among the faithful can result in a homiletical tour-de-force that takes the rich symbolism associated with the Jerusalem Temple and demonstrates how Jesus is the true great High Priest who alone has access to the heavenly sacrificial altar in the presence of God (Hebrews).

These and other contexts provide crucial boundaries that help us to interpret these writings on their own terms as much as possible. Thus while today we really do not have directly parallel contexts that help us to understand, say, the issue of offering meat to idols (1 Cor. 8), it remains important for us to be able to reconstruct and empathize as best we can with that contextual world. As we will see in Chapters 10 and 11, the notion of Jesus as a sacrificial lamb (found e.g., in Paul, John, Hebrews, 1 Peter, and Revelation), indeed an unblemished lamb, is another context rather foreign to us and yet central for the development of the understanding of Jesus as himself unblemished and thus sinless.

To borrow a well-known image from the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, our attentiveness to these contextual conversations provides a “fusion of horizons” whereby the intersection of meanings takes on new meanings and new ways of understanding.<sup>20</sup> This is also the case when we look at the history of biblical interpretation and engage the contexts of an Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, Teresa of Avila, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, or Martin Luther King, Jr., as they too undertook the interpretation of scripture for their day and age. As a result there are always at least two or three conversations going on at once, and

<sup>20</sup> See H. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), and Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*.



the meeting of multiple horizons as we seek to discern trajectories of meaning and direction in our own time.

What do these aspects of context and perspective have to do with the present project? Plenty. Our modern context has witnessed a serious struggle within Christian theology about the notion of atonement, and especially with the concept that God sacrificed his only son on our behalf.<sup>21</sup> The banner slogan of John 3:16 has increasingly come under scrutiny and reconsideration. What kind of a God would express his love by killing his son? Is this a God we choose to uphold as the Lord of the Universe? Our own context of reappraising the traditional Christian doctrine of the atonement, then, provides an important context and perspective for our evaluation of why Jesus needed to be an unblemished sacrifice. Anselm's answer to the question of "Why the God-Man" (*Cur Deus Homo?*) – substitutionary atonement to satisfy God's honor – has proven to be increasingly problematic. And so, in part, this book seeks to understand how and why Jesus' death, and death on the cross, came to be viewed as necessary to the process of salvation, in which process Jesus also came to be seen as the perfect sacrifice atoning for human sin.

#### RETROSPECTIVE THEOLOGY AND HISTORICAL MEMORY

The final consideration, before turning directly to an examination of how Jesus came to be viewed as sinless, is perhaps the most important one. It has to do with what I shall term "retrospective theologizing," to coin a phrase if not a concept. I would define "retrospective theologizing" as the process of making sense of what God is doing in light of both individual and communal religious experiences within the context of a living tradition. Such experiences can both confirm the extant tradition as well as challenge and significantly reshape longstanding traditions and beliefs about how God acts and who God is. I suppose one could call this process "revisionist theologizing," but in my view that is too pejorative a term. I think the term "retrospection" better describes what actually happens – we change and develop our understandings of what we believe God is doing, and of what we think it means to be faithful, in light of new experiences, particularly in view of transformative

<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., D. Tidball, ed., *The Atonement Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008); M. Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006); and J. D. Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011).

experiences.<sup>22</sup> I am not sure how it could be otherwise. Whether we are discussing the canonization of both promonarchial and antimonarchial readings of Israel's kings in I Samuel 8 and 9 or whether we are reflecting on Paul's radical experience that led him to join a group of odd-thinking messianic Jews he had both famously and formerly persecuted (Gal. 1; Acts 9) or on Luke's narration of Peter's heretical dream in Acts 10 instructing him to eat nonkosher food, a vision that led to the inclusion of Gentiles apart from law-observance – all of these are but examples of how transformative experiences led to a new understanding of what God is doing and of what it means to be God's people, all of which were then retrojected back on prior understandings. The same process can be seen throughout the history of the church, whether we think of Tertullian's shift to Montanism, Augustine's conversion experience, Luther's "tower" experience, Teresa of Avila or Juan Diego's visions, John Wesley's heart being strangely warmed, Dorothy Day's *Long Loneliness*, or Thomas Merton's autobiographical statement in *Seven Story Mountain*. Religious experience gives rise to new, and sometimes radically new, theological understandings, and these experiences, in turn, become part of the tradition. So part of the process of retrospective theologizing involves revision of individual and communal understandings of the received faith.

But another part of this process has to do with how we go about imagining different parts of the foundational gospel story. When we think of the Gospel traditions, we typically think of Jesus' life story progressing from birth to baptism to ministry to death and finally to resurrection. It is the normal course of a person's life, from birth to death. In the case of Jesus, however, the conceptualizing of his life in this way is actually rather artificial. While we can understand his baptism, ministry, and death in the relatively common categories of human experience, even though these features of Jesus' life were anything but ordinary, the two poles of virgin birth and resurrection that frame his life are completely outside the realm of human experience. The worlds of Jesus we associate with baptism, ministry, and death make sense to us within the broader context of other pivotal figures of history whose lives saw watershed moments, who founded significant reform movements, and who died tragic deaths. Even in our own recent history these components can be found in the lives of such figures as Gandhi, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., or Archbishop Oscar Romero. What

<sup>22</sup> In his classic *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977) E.P. Sanders argues for a similar notion when he describes Paul's theology as moving from solution to plight (p. 475).

does not make experiential sense to us, however, are these transhistorical moments narrating Jesus' birth and resurrection. These moments are completely beyond our ken, and even those who confess belief in the historicity of these events can do little more than speak of great mystery and the transforming presence of God.

Thus the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is remembered (quite literally) not from his birth but from the conviction that this person who died a tragic and humiliating death on a cross was the same person whom God raised from the dead in triumph and victory. Apart from the resurrection, the death of Jesus is a tragic death that shows he *cannot* be the messiah after all (Luke 24:21). So much hope generated from his powerful ministry, yet so much anguish surrounded his death.<sup>23</sup> If, however, we start with the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, then everything is remembered quite differently. Everything leads ultimately to this triumphal resurrection that not only demonstrates the true messianic identity of Jesus but completely reshapes the very conception of the messiah as one who suffers and dies on behalf of the people, a crucified messiah.

Thus it is with the resurrection of Jesus that Christian tradition really begins. There are no Christians until there are followers of Jesus who have come to believe that the crucified Jesus has been raised from the dead by God, and not just in a vague sort of way but in a very specific and personal way that has directly impacted the lives of these followers. Every aspect of Jesus' life is remembered in light of this conviction about the reality of the resurrection. So the way that Christians conceived of Jesus' life originally progressed in reverse from the shocking news of the resurrection to his tragic death to his public ministry to his baptism, and then finally to reflecting on his birth, at least in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, or – as in the Gospel of John – on his preexistence with God before the foundations of the universe.

I have prefaced the beginning of this book with these comments about retrospective theologizing because I am fully aware that some of the proposals of this book will be controversial. And yet I see myself as both tracing a particular aspect of retrospective theologizing (a descriptive task) and suggesting some new ways of reconceptualizing the Christian tradition in light of the present context (a constructive task). We turn next, then, to the task of providing a taxonomy of sin.

<sup>23</sup> See Schweitzer, *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 370–371.

## A Taxonomy of Sin

THE LANGUAGE AND IMAGERY ASSOCIATED WITH THE TERM “SIN” or “sinner” has a long and complicated history.<sup>1</sup> Partly this is due to nuances that get transformed in translation from one language to another, especially – as we will see – from the ancient Hebrew and Greek original languages of the Bible into English or any other modern language. This is also partly on account of the mixture of religious and ethical overtones inherent in the terms. Thus a taxonomy or categorization of the terminology associated with sin can help to sort things out and clarify the use of these terms that otherwise can be misleading and puzzling. The taxonomy that follows not only examines understandings of sin in the biblical writings and the period of formative Christianity, but also addresses notions of sin as they have developed over time. Although not a comprehensive history, which is beyond the scope of this book, a thorough understanding of sin from a variety of perspectives will prove useful as we proceed. This kind of a taxonomy will be especially important before moving ahead in the following chapters to a consideration of Jesus as sinner or transgressor, perfect or otherwise.

<sup>1</sup> Several recent studies on the history of sin have appeared. See especially J. Portmann, *A History of Sin: Its Evolution to Today and Beyond* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007); J. Portmann, ed., *In Defense of Sin* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); G. Anderson, *Sin: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009); P. Fredriksen, *Sin: The Early History of an Idea* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012); J. Morone, *Hellfire Nation: The Politics of Sin in American History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003); and K. Harper, *From Shame to Sin: The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

## A GENERAL UNDERSTANDING OF SIN

In modern Christianity “sin” typically refers somewhat generically to an act (in thought, word, or deed) that is morally offensive to humans and especially to God. The commission of a sin violates the relationships God intends between humans and God, as well as between and among humans. Thus the religious and ethical components of sin are evident, as reference to sin describes something that has gone wrong in both human–divine and human–human relationships. The traditional language of the Anglican Book of Common Prayer perhaps puts it as well as any Christian “Confession of Sin”:

Most merciful God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
 we confess that we have sinned in thought, word and deed.  
 We have not loved thee with our whole heart.  
 We have not loved our neighbours as ourselves.  
 In thy mercy forgive what we have been,  
 help us to amend what we are,  
 and direct what we shall be;  
 that we may do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with thee, our God.  
 Amen.

Slightly older versions of the prayer ask forgiveness in a related manner:

Almighty and most merciful Father,

- we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep,
- we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts,
- we have offended against thy holy laws,
- we have left undone those things which we ought to have done,
- and we have done those things which we ought not to have done.<sup>2</sup>

Three aspects of sin can be seen in both versions of the prayer. First, sin entails thought and/or action. This connection between inward attitude and outward action can already be seen in the prophetic literature of ancient Israel. The famous passage from Jeremiah 31:33–34, for example, reflects a covenant tradition written not on stone tablets, but on the hearts of God’s people:

But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer

<sup>2</sup> Both versions of the prayer of confession come from Form 4 of *Common Worship: Services and Prayers for the Church of England* (London: Church House Publishing, 2012).

shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Christian tradition picks up directly on how outward sinful acts reflect the inward sinful dispositions of the heart. This concept can be found in Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus warns, for example, not just against the action of committing adultery, but also against the lustful thought or desire that may lead to the action (Mt 5:28).

Second, sin involves the violation of a normative standard of behavior that has been prescribed by God. The transgression may be an offensive word or act (a sin of commission), or it may be the failure to speak or act (a sin of omission). The notion of sin as an offensive word or act is perhaps the most common understanding. Isaiah 30:1, for example, laments:

Oh, rebellious children, says the LORD,  
who carry out a plan, but not mine;  
who make an alliance, but against my will,  
adding sin to sin.

The sin of omission can be clearly seen in Jesus’ parable of the last judgment from Matthew 25:41–46:

Then he will say to those at his left hand, “You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.”

The commandments of God give not only negative prohibitions, but also positive injunctions about the duties and responsibilities of the faithful.

Third, sin is inherently relational. It involves the violation of the intended relationship between a human agent and God, as well as the violation of the proper relationship between humans.<sup>3</sup> The violation in both instances is a moral transgression, an ethical lapse, as well as a transcendent religious offense. The story of Cain and Abel from Genesis 4 shows such a moral failure in an extreme way. God warns Cain not to be downcast because God did not favor Cain’s offering of the fruits of the soil (4:6–7). “If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the

<sup>3</sup> C. Plantinga has defined sin against God and neighbor as “any agential evil for which some person (or group of persons) is to blame. In short, sin is culpable shalom-breaking.” *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 14.

door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.” This notion of sin “lurking at the door,” seeking to possess Cain, finds a tragic outcome as Cain lures Abel out into the field (Cain’s turf), where he kills his brother (4:8). He has violated his relationship with his brother in the most grievous way possible. And to drive the point home, when God asks Cain where his brother Able is (4:9). Cain first responds with a lie (“I do not know”) and then with a question that further demonstrates the violation of his relationship with his brother: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” The answer, of course, is yes.

This violation of human relationships, which in turn is a violation of the relationship with God, can be found over and over in the stories of the Bible. From Adam blaming Eve for his own failure to obey God’s command (Gen. 3:12) to the brothers of Joseph selling him into slavery (they intended it for evil, but God used it for good; Gen. 45:5–8) to David having Bathsheba’s husband Uriah intentionally killed in battle (“But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord,” 2 Sam. 11:27) to Peter denying knowing Jesus (Mark 14:66–72), and perhaps even to Jesus calling the Gentile woman who pleads for her daughter a dog (Mark 7:27), the transgression of right relationships between humans – and hence the right relationships between humans and God – is a prominent feature of sin throughout the biblical witness.<sup>4</sup>

The language of “transgression” here serves nicely to illustrate a general feature about the understanding of sin. The term “transgress” literally means to cross over a boundary. In this case the boundary is an ethical/moral boundary that has to do with right relationships, namely, righteousness (a favorite term in Matthew’s Gospel – see 3:15; 5:6, 10, 20; 6:33; 21:32 – and especially for Paul – 29 times in Romans alone). A transgression is an intentional or inadvertent misstep that violates a relational boundary.

#### TRANSLATING SIN

The word “sin” is used to translate a variety of terms from the ancient Hebrew and Greek original languages of the Bible. In the case of the Hebrew Bible it is also important to consider the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Jewish Scriptures that was completed around 200 BCE. All of the early Christians whose writings eventually became part of the New Testament canon used the

<sup>4</sup> See W. Willimon, “A Peculiarly Christian Account of Sin,” *Theology Today* 50:2 (1993): 220–228.

Greek version of the Jewish Scriptures, and not the Hebrew. Thus their language was strongly influenced by terms found in the Septuagint.

The original Hebrew term most commonly translated into English as “sin” is *chatta’t*. This term appears 269 times in the Hebrew Bible, especially in Leviticus, Numbers, 1 and 2 Kings, the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, and in the Psalms. Two other terms also find frequent usage. The word *‘avon* is used 233 times in the Hebrew Bible and is typically translated as “iniquity” or “sin.” The term appears most frequently in Leviticus, Numbers, and in the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Hosea. The word *pesha’* occurs 134 times in the Hebrew Bible and is often rendered as “transgression” or “offense.” This term occurs especially in the prophets Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Amos, as well as in the Psalms, Job, and Proverbs. It is not uncommon for these various terms to appear together, as in Genesis 31:36, where Jacob asks Laban, “What is my offense [*pesha’*]? What is my sin [*chatta’t*], that you have hotly pursued me?” Or again in Exodus 34:7: when Moses receives the Ten Commandments for the second time, Moses describes God as “keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity [*‘avon*] and transgression [*pesha’*] and sin [*chatta’t*]” (NRSV).

The Septuagint translation of these terms from the Hebrew original into Greek is roughly parallel, though the Septuagint does not always translate the terms in a consistent manner. For example, the Exodus 34:7 passage in Greek uses the terms *anomias kai adikias kai hamartias*, which means (to give a fairly literal translation) that God forgives “lawlessness, and unrighteousness, and sin.” The Septuagint tends to default to the most generic of the terms, *hamartia*, which appears 526 times in the Septuagint, often translating the Hebrew *chatta’t*, but also *pesha’* and *‘avon*. The term occurs especially in Leviticus, Numbers, Sirach (not included in the Hebrew Bible), and the Psalms. Similarly, the Greek term *anomia* (“lawlessness”) is found 224 times in the Septuagint, renders various terms from the Hebrew, and appears most often in the Psalms (80 times) and the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel. And the Greek term *adikia* (“unrighteousness”) is used 215 times in the Septuagint; it also renders various terms from the Hebrew and appears most often in the Psalms (28 times) and the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel. For example, Genesis 15:16 states that the “iniquity” (NRSV), “sin” (NIV), or “wickedness” (NAB) of the Amorites is not yet complete (or reached its full measure). These three English versions each translate the Hebrew original *‘avon*, while the Septuagint uses the term *hamartiai* (“sins”). But in Exodus 34:9 Moses prays on behalf of the Israelites: “If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, I pray, let the Lord go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your



inheritance.” The terms “iniquity” and “sin” in the Hebrew original are *‘avon* and *chatta’t*, respectively; they are rendered in the Septuagint by the terms *hamartias* and *anomias*.<sup>5</sup>

To round out this discussion it is also important to address the language for the term “sinner” in the Hebrew Bible and in the Septuagint. The primary term for “sinner” in the Hebrew Bible is *rasha’*; the plural *resha’im* (“sinners”) also occurs frequently (a combined 329 times). The Septuagint uses a variety of terms to translate *rasha’*. Sometimes the Greek term “ungodly” is used (*asebēs*, e.g., Gen. 18:23), sometimes “unjust” (*adikos*, e.g., Exod. 23:1), sometimes “lawless” (*anomos*, e.g., Isa. 3:11), and more. There is, however, a more consistent approach to the Hebrew term *rasha’* in the Greek version of the Psalms. Of the 73 occurrences of *rasha’*, it is translated 62 times (85%) by the Greek word *hamartōlos* (“sinner”).<sup>6</sup> As Neale has noted, “If the Gospel tradition was influenced by the LXX’s [Septuagint’s] use of *hamartōlos*, the Psalms are likely to have played the most important role.”<sup>7</sup>

The question we must ask is whether anything crucial gets lost in translation here, either from the Hebrew to the Greek or from the Hebrew to the English. The answer is “No, not really,” although there are shifts in nuance. I think the best way to view such differences is to realize that to read something in an original language (any original language) is to read it in color, and to read something that has been translated is to read it in black and white. One misses some nuances in the translation, and euphemisms are always difficult to convey, but the underlying idea is still communicated. At times, to be sure, there can be egregious mistranslations,<sup>8</sup> but on the whole the Septuagint does a credible job of translating the Hebrew. More important for our purposes here is simply to note that all of the early Christians were using the Septuagint version of the Jewish scriptures, and as best we can tell none of them used the Hebrew original. This means that in terms of nuances and semantics our concern will be more focused on the Greek of the Septuagint that served as the sacred scriptures for the authors of all of the New Testament writings, all of which were also written and handed down originally in Greek.

<sup>5</sup> See D.H. Adams, *The Sinner in Luke* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2008), 21–67; and D.A. Neale, *None but the Sinners: Religious Categories in the Gospel of Luke* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 75–86.

<sup>6</sup> Neale, *None but the Sinners*, 76. <sup>7</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the best example is the LXX mistranslation of Zechariah 9:9, turning the one animal of the Hebrew original into two animals in the LXX, which mistake in turn leads Matthew astray into having Jesus ride two animals into Jerusalem in fulfillment of the prophecy (Matt. 21:5).

When we turn to the New Testament writings the term most commonly associated with “sin” is the word group *hamartanō* (in this case the verb form, “to sin”; the noun “sin” is *hamartia*; and a “sinner” is a *hamartōlos*). In its verb form *hamartanō* appears 43 times in the New Testament; *hamartia* occurs 73 times; and *hamartōlos* can be found 47 times. The terms for sin occur most frequently in the letters of Paul (especially Romans), the Gospel of John, Hebrews, and 1 John.

The root meaning of the term is linked to “missing the mark” or “erring.” In classical Greek the word could have a literal meaning, as in missing a target, or a more metaphorical meaning, as in having a personal or moral shortcoming. The term could be free of judgmental overtones, as in the case of an unintentional mistake, or it could imply definite fault or guilt. The noun form *hamartia* (sin) could have the sense of an offense that was committed. Aristotle, long before the early Christian writers, referred to *hamartia* in the context of his discussion of virtue: “Virtue is concerned with feelings and actions in which excess and deficiency constitute misses of the mark, while the mean is praised and on target, both of which are characteristics of virtue” (*Nicomachean Ethics* II.6, 1106b).<sup>9</sup> The word implies a target of action, an appropriate goal. To miss the mark is to “sin.” While there can certainly be an innocent missing of the mark, the term “sin” typically comes to refer to moral culpability in which an individual has consciously and intentionally missed the known target or mark, and in so doing has violated his or her right relationship with another person. In both the Septuagint and the New Testament writings, such missing of the mark by definition entailed a religious violation of one’s relationship with God as well.

Just as there were other terms for “sin” in the Hebrew scriptures beyond *chatta’t*, so in the Greek New Testament there are additional words used in conjunction with the primary word group *hamartanō*, though much less frequently. The NRSV can render three different Greek terms all with the same translation of “transgression”: *paraptōma* (e.g., Gal. 6:1), *parabasis* (e.g., Heb. 2:2), and *paranomia* (2 Pet. 2:16). All three words connote a similar semantic range – transgression, disobedience, trespass, wrongdoing, and the like. (The NIV Bible translates these three Greek words as “sin,” “disobedience,” and “wrongdoing,” respectively, while the NAB offers “transgression,” “transgression,” and “crime.”) Similarly, the term *skandalizō* (to be a stumbling block, to cause offense, to cause to sin) has some of

<sup>9</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. and trans. R. Crisp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 30.

the same overtones as other terms for sin (e.g., Matt. 5:29; 13:57; Mark 6:3), as does *asebeia* (connoting impiety or godlessness; e.g., Rom. 1:18; 2 Tim. 2:16; Jude 15).

### CONSTRUCTING SIN

Any taxonomy of sin must recognize that the concept of sin is a construct.<sup>10</sup> Whether perceived as a divine revelation, as human articulations of rights and wrongs, or as some combination of the two, the notion of sin has been constructed in different ways. In the Judaism of late antiquity, the immediate context for the rise of Christianity, different groups of Jews had slightly different approaches to the meaning and construction of sin. Sin stood out as that which missed the goal of individual and communal life lived out in faith before God. To sin was to act against God's intentions for humanity, but it stood out in relief only against a clear understanding of God's intentions. What was it that made sin "sinful"? What was the target that sinful humanity missed? What was the sinful plight from which God needed to save humanity? A brief look at two answers to these questions, from the perspectives of Pharisaic Judaism and the Qumran community, will help to contextualize some of the developments within the earliest Christian traditions in the chapters that follow.

In Pharisaic Judaism God's solution to the plight of Israel's sinful disobedience was the giving of the Mosaic Law. Thus faithful observance of the Jewish law is the target and goal, as such observance expresses and maintains the covenant relationship God has established with God's people Israel. Observance of the law entails observance of the Jerusalem Temple cult developed in the law itself, and the maintenance of the priestly oversight of the Temple and its sacrifices. The law teaches the faithful how to worship God in purity and holiness. If someone is guilty of transgressing the law, the law itself provides the appropriate remedies for dealing with sin.<sup>11</sup>

In Pharisaic Judaism, then, the target is covenant obedience to God, regulated by faithful interpretation of the law and with it faithful maintenance of the sacrificial cult in the Jerusalem Temple. Covenant fidelity is the solution to the problem of human sin. In Pharisaic Judaism, the oral law, the *halakhic* interpretation of the written law, was crucial in defining exactly what covenant fidelity entailed for the faithful Jew. "Building a fence around

<sup>10</sup> See especially Portmann, *A History of Sin*, who emphasizes various social constructions of sin.

<sup>11</sup> See E.P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief, 63BCE–66CE* (London: SCM Press, 1992).

the law," as articulated in the *Pirke Avoth* (*Sayings of the Fathers*, 1:1), became one interpretive guide for determining the appropriate boundaries between fidelity and transgression, between upholding the covenant and sinning against God. The *halakhic* debate between the Pharisees and Jesus over sin depicted in the Gospel traditions indicates that there was no doubt on either side that God had provided a solution for human sin. The Pharisees and Jesus are portrayed as simply disagreeing over what counted for sin according to the law, and thus over what faithful observance of the law entailed.

In contrast to Pharisaic Judaism, the Judaism reflected in the Qumran literature had a somewhat different set of emphases in its understanding of sin. In large part this different understanding stems from the conviction reflected in the Dead Sea Scrolls that the regular means of worshipping God through the Temple cult in Jerusalem had been fundamentally corrupted. From the perspective of the Qumran sectarians, "the current temple is ritually defiled as a result of a failure by the priests in power to follow the correct ritual purity law."<sup>12</sup> Part of the anti-Temple polemic included the charge that the Temple had been *morally* defiled by the sin of the "wicked priest" to such a degree that the Temple could no longer function as an effective place of sacrifice to deal with the sins of the people. Indeed, the leadership of the Temple was only adding to the sins and transgressions that were piling up. This situation was all the more dire because, in the view of the Qumran sectarians, moral and ritual defilement were two sides of the same coin. The only way to be freed from sin was by association with the sectarian community itself. As described in the Community Rule, one of the earlier documents from Qumran, whoever is outside the community:

shall not be reckoned among the perfect; he shall neither be purified by atonement, nor cleansed by purifying waters, nor sanctified by seas and rivers, nor washed clean with any ablution . . . For it is through the spirit of true counsel concerning the ways of man that all his sins shall be expiated, that he may contemplate the light of life. (1 QS 3.4–7)

The "true counsel," of course, is that offered by the Qumran community. The only way to prepare for God's eschatological fulfillment and attain both ritual and moral purity was by removal from sinful society and by participating in the rigorous community of the children of light at Qumran.

<sup>12</sup> J. Klawans, *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 91.

The early Christian conviction, however, was that neither observance of the Jewish law nor conducting the Temple cult in the right way was the path to salvation from human sin. Rather, the conviction held by “Christian Jews” in the earliest days was the belief that Jesus was the messiah who had died for sins and had been triumphantly raised from the dead by God in vindication of Jesus’ faithful life, a vindication that brought with it forgiveness of sins to all who believed in what God had done through Jesus.

#### IDENTIFYING SINNERS

While there is much agreement among scholars regarding the terms for sin, a significant debate continues regarding the identity of “sinners” in earliest Christianity. The texts of Matthew 9:13 (“I have come not to call the righteous, but sinners”; Mark 2:17 and Luke 5:32) and Matthew 11:19 (which refers to Jesus as a “friend of tax collectors and sinners”) have been particularly important in this discussion. The Greek in both instances is *hamartōloi*. So who were these “sinners”? Over the years a variety of views have been proffered, many of them overlapping. Three approaches stand out. (1) The term “sinners” referred to morally disreputable individuals such as robbers, prostitutes, and murderers, as well as to individuals engaged in disreputable trades (variously listed as camel-drivers, herdsmen, barbers, tanners, and many more, often debated).<sup>13</sup> (2) Closely related to the first approach, the argument of some scholars is that “sinners” represented an identifiable and recognizable social group, especially from the perspective of the Pharisees, that included various kinds of outcasts – the despised tradesmen, the wantonly immoral, Gentiles, and non-Pharisaic Jews. The emphasis here is on the “sinners” as a social class.<sup>14</sup> (3) Distinct from the first two approaches is the argument that “sinners” does not refer at all to a particular historical

<sup>13</sup> This approach is most commonly linked to J. Jeremias’ influential article, “Zöllner und Sünder,” *ZNW* 30 (1931): 293–300, developed further in his *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1967), 303–312, and in his *New Testament Theology I: The Proclamation of Jesus* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1971), 108–113. E.P. Sanders demonstrated that Jeremias uncritically blurred the *‘am ha-aretz* (the common people of the land) with sinners. Sanders identifies “sinners” (*hamartoloi*) as a technical term translating the Hebrew *resha’im*. “It is best translated ‘the wicked,’ and it refers to those who sinned willfully and heinously and who did not repent” (*Jesus and Judaism* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985], p. 177). See also Sanders’ article, “Jesus and the Sinners,” *JSNT* 19 (1983): 5–36; see further Adams, *The Sinner in Luke*, 3–20, and Neale, *None but the Sinners*, 40–97.

<sup>14</sup> M. Borg has championed this view in his *Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teaching of Jesus* (New York: Edwin Mellon Press, 1984), 83–84, and in *Jesus: A New Vision* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1987), 91–92. See the sharp criticism of Borg’s approach in Neale, *None but the Sinners*, 70–71.

social group or set of groups; rather, the term is fundamentally an ideological construct used by one group to demonize another. Thus, the term “sinners” has to do with an ideological and corporate indictment as a generic religious category, and not always with a clearly defined referent.<sup>15</sup>

This debate over the meaning of the term “sinner” not only is significant in its own right, but for our purposes it has special importance because Jesus is labeled as a “sinner” by some of his opponents in the New Testament itself. In John 9:24, within the context of the story where Jesus heals a man born blind during the Sabbath, some Pharisaic leaders conclude that Jesus is a *hamartōlos*, a sinner, because he violated the Sabbath restrictions by healing the man on the Sabbath. (Only matters of life and death warranted violating the Sabbath prohibition against working, whether that involved farming or working as a physician.) They tell the man who had been healed to give God the praise for his recovery of sight, because one who breaks the law that God had given should not be viewed in a positive light. From this vantage Jesus was a sinner who transgressed the boundaries of the law.

## SIN AND CONSEQUENCES

As we have seen, sin typically has to do with the violation of boundaries, the violation of proper relationships, particularly as expressed in covenants and rules that are intended to regulate these boundaries and relationships between humans and with God. But acts of sin are one thing, and the consequences of sin are another. The consequences of sin typically involve four stages: (1) the naming of sin, (2) the punishment of sin, (3) the repentance for sin, and (4) the restoration of the sinner.

### *Naming Sin*

When someone transgresses a boundary or violates a relationship one of two things can happen. First, as often happens, the sin can go unnamed and unchallenged. The violation of boundary or relationship is not acknowledged as such. In such cases the failure to name sin is but a further violation, an extension of the sin itself, as if an unchecked contagion. Thus a sin of commission is followed by a sin of omission, the failure to name the sin. But second, as also often happens, the sin can be named and the sinner held to

<sup>15</sup> See Neale, *None but the Sinners*; G.B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (London: Duckworth, 1980), 92–93; and Adams, *The Sinner in Luke*, 19–20.

account. The naming of sin involves an appeal to an agreed-on communal authority, and this authority backs the victim of sin by naming the sin and confronting the sinner. A good example of this can be found in the rules for church order from Matthew 18:15–17:

If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

Here we see a progression of naming sin. First, the person who has been wronged names the sin directly to the offender. Next, if this does not bring repentance and reconciliation, then the person who has been wronged brings along one or two others who function as supportive witnesses and as advocates for the victim against the one who has sinned. And if this still does not bring about recognition and change in the sinner, then the sinner is brought before the entire community. Such action makes it clear that the community as a whole agrees in the naming of the sin and in challenging the sinner to recognize the violation. This action also makes it clear that there is another fundamental reality going on that must be acknowledged: the violation of a relationship between persons is a violation of an entire community, the violation of a set of relationships. If the sinner has wronged one person, the community recognizes that if unchecked or unnamed the sinner has the potential to violate other relationships. The Apostle Paul basically appeals to this logic in the case of a man who is sexually involved with his stepmother (1 Cor. 5). Paul is upset with the Corinthians for failing precisely to name the sin and challenge the sinner:

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not found even among pagans; for a man is living with his father's wife. And you are arrogant! Should you not rather have mourned, so that he who has done this would have been removed from among you? . . . Do you not know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough? (1 Cor. 5:1–2. . .6)

Thus naming sin and challenging the sinner, whether gently at first or eventually in a more communal and confrontational manner, is the first stage in dealing with the act of sin.

### *Punishing Sin*

Once named, the sin and the sinner can be addressed directly. Because the violation of boundaries and relationships is not an uncommon event (as Augustine noted long ago, we are habitual sinners),<sup>16</sup> most communities have over time worked out a set of punishments and penalties that seem appropriate and proportionate to the sin in question. Some sins are unintentional, and hence typically carry a lesser consequence, whereas some sins are intentional and thus warrant harsher consequences. With unintentional violations of boundaries or relationships the sinner in question often names the sin him- or herself, and so does not need to be convinced that a particular act was in fact sinful. In cases where the sinner is not aware that an action was wrong, the person is often willing to be instructed and learn about appropriate boundaries (this is especially the case with children). But with intentional violations of boundaries or relationships the sinner has knowingly acted against a relational norm established by the community, often with an appeal to violating a boundary put in place by God. And in such cases the response of the community must be clear and direct, lest the community risk further harm from the initial violation, and lest the offender sin again in a similar manner. In this way the process can begin of calling the sinner to repentance and possible reconciliation.

A good analogy may be drawn here with sports. All sports have sets of rules that the players must follow. If the players violate the rules, there are consequences. This is why virtually all sports have impartial umpires or referees whose job it is to “call” the game. In the sport of hockey, for example, when a player violates a rule (indeed, a relationship), the referee blows a whistle and stops play in order to deal with the transgression. In the case of high-sticking (when a player intentionally or inadvertently raises the stick above the height of the cross bar of a hockey goal, especially when such action results in injury to a player of the opposing team), the referee calls the foul and sends the offending player to the penalty box, where he or she sits for two minutes, if a minor foul, or four minutes, if a major foul. During this time the player is not replaced on the ice, and the offending team plays with one fewer player for the duration of the penalty. The penalty box where the player sits is colloquially called the “sin bin” in hockey. The language and the penalty are both very instructive here. First, it is not

<sup>16</sup> “For the law of sin is the force of habit, by which the mind is dragged along and held fast, even against its will.” *Confessions* 7.5.12, H. Chadwick, trans. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).



uncommon for a player to be labeled “guilty” of committing a foul. Second, the penalty itself involves loss of time and strength for the team as a whole, and loss of time for the player who committed the foul. Some fouls also come with additional financial penalties assessed against the player after the game. This is also the case in basketball, American football, and soccer.

In American football the penalties have to do not with loss of time or strength, as in hockey, but with loss of yards. Some penalties are more procedural in nature (e.g., a player being off-sides, or a false start in the offensive line). The penalties for such procedural violations are relatively minor – 5 yards. But other penalties are more egregious and result in more yardage being awarded to the opposing team. A personal foul, for example, can be called against a player who has violated rules that regulate how an opposing player may be tackled. If a defensive player grabs the offensive player’s face mask or aims his helmet at the opposing player’s head, then the referee can call for a personal foul, a fifteen-yard penalty against the offending team. In football the penalty does not involve time or strength, but literal distance toward or away from a team’s goal. One could use the sports of soccer or basketball to illustrate comparable violations and penalties. The point is that violation of boundaries and relationships has negative consequences for the individual who has committed the transgression, as well as for the individual’s team or community.

In the religious world of early Judaism and Christianity, the penalty for sin could be expulsion, as we have seen in Matthew and Paul. But typically the penalty was designed to discourage repeat offenses and to prevent harm to the community at large. At Qumran the penalty for violating a rule depended on the severity of the offense. The Community Rule (1 QS 6.25–7.25) articulates very particular penalties for various offenses. “If one has lied deliberately in matters of property, he shall be excluded from the pure Meal of the Congregation for one year and shall do penance with respect to one quarter of his food” (1 QS 6.25).<sup>17</sup> If someone has spoken foolishly, they shall do penance for three months (1 QS 7.9). More serious was any challenge to the community authorities: “Whoever has murmured against the authority of the Community shall be expelled and shall not return. But if he has murmured against his companion unjustly, he shall

<sup>17</sup> G. Vermes, ed. and trans., *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (New York: Penguin, 1997), 107–108. On practices of expulsion, see G. Forkman, *The Limits of the Religious Community: Expulsion from the Religious Community within the Qumran Sect, within Rabbinic Judaism, and within Primitive Christianity* (Coniectanea Biblica, New Testament Series 5, 1972).

do penance for six months” (1 QS 7.18). Later Christian casuistry saw the development of a complex system that meted out very precise penalties for each sinful act.<sup>18</sup>

### *Repenting Sin*

The fundamental proclamation of Jesus, following on that of John the Baptist, called for repentance of sin in anticipation of the coming of God’s kingdom. As John the Baptist proclaimed a “baptism of repentance for forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4; Matt. 3:6; Luke 3:3), so the Gospel of Mark tells us, “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news’” (Mark 1:14; Matt. 4:17).<sup>19</sup> The call for repentance is a call for moral and religious transformation. This aspect of repentance can already be seen in the Greek word that is rendered in English as “repent,” *metanoeō*. The term literally means to change one’s mind, to think differently, though this is not merely a cognitive process. In the Hebrew Bible the word *shuv*, which literally means “to return,” is often translated as “repent” in English. (The Septuagint translates *shuv* with the word *epistrepheō*, which means “to turn” or “return.”) When used to connote repentance the word group associated with the Hebrew *teshuvah* (repentance) has overtones of both turning *away from sin* and turning *toward God*.<sup>20</sup>

Two passages from the Bible nicely illustrate the notion of repentance from sin, King David’s repentance for the whole Bathsheba affair (Psalm 51), and Jesus’ story about the Prodigal Son’s repentance (Luke 15). Beginning with Psalm 51, the heading of the Psalm overtly identifies it as: “A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.” The incident with Bathsheba is recounted in 2 Samuel 11. After

<sup>18</sup> See especially S. Toulmin, *The Abuse of Casuistry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), and J. Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology: A Study of the Roman Catholic Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

<sup>19</sup> E.P. Sanders has famously challenged whether or not, in fact, Jesus actually preached repentance. He attributes the repentance motif to early Christian tradition. See Sanders, “Jesus and the Sinners,” *JSNT* 19 (1983): 5–36; and the responses of B. Chilton, “The Repentance of E.P. Sanders,” *TB* 39 (1988): 1–18; D. C. Allison, “Jesus and the Covenant: A Response to E.P. Sanders,” *JSNT* 29 (1987): 57–78; and T. Hågerland, “Jesus and the Rites of Repentance,” *NTS* 22 (2006): 166–187.

<sup>20</sup> For turning away from sin, see 1 Kings 13:33; Jer. 36:7; Ezek. 18:21; Jon. 3:8, 10; for turning to God, see 1 Sam. 7:3; Neh. 1:9; Isa. 55:7. See further T. Hågerland, “Jesus and the Rites of Repentance,” 168.

the prophet Nathan has confronted David with his sin (adultery with Bathsheba and indirect murder of her husband Uriah), and David has unwittingly pronounced judgment on himself (2 Sam. 12:5), David acknowledges his sin: “I have sinned against the Lord” (2 Sam. 12:13). Psalm 51 serves as an extended confession of David’s sin, expressing his anguish and remorse, and earnestly seeking God’s forgiveness (51:1–2):

Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your steadfast love;  
according to your abundant mercy  
blot out my transgressions.  
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,  
and cleanse me from my sin.

The language of repentance includes an acknowledgment of sin (51:3–5), a plea for mercy and forgiveness, and a cleansing from sin that has polluted and distorted David’s relationship with God. It is not just a matter of the outward act of sin; rather, David acknowledges that God desires “truth in the inward being” (51:6). This is why David petitions: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me” (51:10). Repentance involves a genuine desire for change and reform, not just the possibility of getting away with the sinful act. The language of purging, of having broken bones and a broken spirit, stand at the heart of David’s prayer (51:8, 17). God is just in God’s judgment against David. The child conceived through his adultery dies, Bathsheba mourns, and his sin has taken its toll. But he repents, returns to God, and seeks to be reconciled with God: “Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit” (51:12). He pledges himself to God anew, and he seeks God’s help and strength. He basically acknowledges that in and of himself he does not have the capacity to act as he should. His fundamental orientation must be directed toward God, and from that will flow a renewed spirit and heart that will sustain David in his daily interactions with others, and in his leadership of the people Israel as their king. Even the king is not above the laws and moral standards that apply to the whole people. A new humility arises in David as a result of this tragic experience of sin and repentance.<sup>21</sup>

The story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32) provides another helpful illustration of the dynamic of repentance. The context of the story in Luke 15 is significant to note. The chapter begins with the following statement

<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., M. Tate, *Psalms 51–100* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005), and J. Goldingay, *Psalms 42–86* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006).

regarding Jesus' association with sinners: "Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them'" (15:1-2). The stories that follow (the lost sheep, the lost coin) all involve Jesus' teaching about the joy of God at the repentance of sinners (15:10). The story of the Prodigal Son is the longest and most developed story that illustrates Jesus' point.

The sin of the Prodigal Son is twofold. First, he abandons his father and older brother, but not without first taking the inheritance to which he is entitled. He is selfish. Second, he wastes his inheritance on what would commonly be referred to as "sins of the flesh" (at least this is how the older brother sees things, 15:30). But a severe famine hits, and the younger son, having squandered everything, has nothing left. He takes a lowly job feeding pigs, but this still leaves him starving. Unlike his father, who had given him everything, here in this distant land we hear that "no one gave him anything" (15:16). Now comes the moment of repentance. Unlike with the story of King David, who is convicted of his sin only when confronted by the prophet Nathan, in the story of the Prodigal Son we are told very simply that "he came to himself" (or "he came to his senses" – NIV). He realized how his selfish and foolish decisions had gotten him into this mess, and he repented. It is no accident that the repentant son comes to his senses as he is starving while feeding pigs, the foremost representation of unclean animals.

His repentance is demonstrated by his resolve to return to his father's home, to confess his sin "against heaven and against you" (15:18, NAB), and his decision to seek to be taken back not as a son, but only as a hired servant. He is no longer worthy to be called his son (15:18-19), for he has not acted as a son would act. As the story unfolds, we come to learn that his father sees him coming while still a long way off. And rather than being filled with anger or judgment, as one might expect, rather than even waiting to see what this seemingly ungrateful son has to say for himself, the father is filled with compassion, runs to meet him, embraces him, and kisses him. This is hardly the homecoming the Prodigal had anticipated or had the right to expect. Even after this clear display of welcome and implicit forgiveness, however, the Prodigal follows through with his demonstration of repentance by saying what he had resolved to say. "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son" (15:22, NAB). His act of repentance is now complete. The response of the father is as overwhelming as was the son's ability to waste his inheritance: "But his father ordered his servants, 'Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Take the fattened calf and slaughter it.

Then let us celebrate with a feast, because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.’ Then the celebration began” (15:22–24, NAB). Most amazing about this story is the decision of the father to forgive without even knowing (or even caring?) if the son has repented. All the father seems to know is that his son is again home and that all will be well. The narrative continues with the story of the older brother’s dismay at the reception “this son of yours” has received (15:30). The older brother is not so willing to forgive and forget. Nor is the older brother’s resentment resolved. (Does the older brother need to repent of his resentment toward his father and younger brother?)

These two accounts of repentance, then, show us some of the dynamics inherent in genuine repentance of sin according to the biblical narrative. Repentance starts with a recognition of the sin and the harm done. The recognition is heartfelt. There is an awareness of how sin has polluted the relationship between the sinner and God, and between the sinner and those wronged. A new sense of humility and the need for God takes hold. In general, repentance involves a return to God, and a turning away from sin. Finally, there is an awareness of the need for restoration to the community of the faithful and to God.

### *Restoring the Sinner*

The restoration of the sinner to the community depends largely on the punishment that the community has meted out. Relatively minor sins involve relatively minor penance; major sins could eventuate in permanent exile from the community. At Qumran we saw that speaking foolishly earned three months of penance, whereas speaking against the authorities of the community warranted complete expulsion without the chance of being restored to the community. What counted as a minor sin or a more serious sin was a matter of some debate, especially during times of suffering and persecution. The Maccabean revolt of the mid-second century BCE began in response to the mandate from the Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes that Jews make sacrifices to pagan gods. The stalwart Jew Mattathias refused to give in to such demands, and when Mattathias saw a Jew who committed apostasy by worshiping the pagan gods, “he burned with zeal and his heart was stirred. He gave vent to righteous anger; he ran and killed him on the altar” (1 Macc. 2:24). And so the revolt was launched. The sin of apostasy warranted death.

Several centuries later during the sporadic persecution of early Christians under the Emperor Decius in mid-third century Carthage, the bishop

Cyprian faced quite a dilemma. Should he stand fast, refuse the emperor's edict to sacrifice to the gods of Rome, and risk execution? Or should he go into hiding so he could continue to lead his church in the midst of a great ordeal? Cyprian chose to flee (he was eventually martyred during a later persecution), which caused great debate among other church leaders. Even more difficult was how Cyprian should deal with the lapsed Christians who had committed apostasy and made sacrifice to the pagan gods. In his treatise *On the Lapsed* Cyprian strove for a middle path that allowed those who had committed the sin of apostasy to be reconciled to the church after an appropriate period of penance.<sup>22</sup>

The way for the sinner to rejoin the community was never self-evident. The author of Hebrews, for example, warned sternly against falling away from the community of faith: "For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, . . . and then have fallen away, since on their own they are crucifying again the Son of God and are holding him up to contempt" (6:4–6). From this perspective the sin of falling away was irredeemable.<sup>23</sup> Jesus could also refer to an unforgivable sin – the much-debated sin against the Holy Spirit (Mark 3:29).<sup>24</sup>

Still, though such serious sins are reflected in Jewish and Christian tradition alike, in most cases it was possible to restore the repentant sinner to the community of faith. The one who had committed the sin typically must acknowledge the sin, submit to the penalty, repent of the sin, and only then seek readmission to full community.<sup>25</sup> Ironically, this traditional practice of the church actually runs counter to the parable of the Prodigal Son. In that story the father not only welcomed the son back, but planned to do so without any awareness of repentance on the part of the son. As we will see, part of the scandal of Jesus' ministry was his practice of including sinners in advance of any repentance. Jesus simply announced that sinners already belonged to the community. Thus the pattern of restoration progresses not from repentance to inclusion but from inclusion to repentance, or perhaps without even the requirement of repentance, if E.P. Sanders is correct.

<sup>22</sup> See J.P. Burns, *Cyprian the Bishop* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 12–50.

<sup>23</sup> See L. Johnson, *Hebrews* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 160–164, and C. Koester, *Hebrews* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 318–324.

<sup>24</sup> See J. Marcus, *Mark 1–8* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 283–285, and A.Y. Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 234–235.

<sup>25</sup> D. Allison identifies four stages to repentance: "restitution, confession, prayer for forgiveness, and the resolve to avoid future sins." "Jesus and the Covenant: A Response to E.P. Sanders," 71.

Sanders has argued that it was Jesus' practice of including sinners apart from requiring repentance that got him into trouble with the religious authorities. "Jesus taught and acted out the message that those who followed him, even though they were still 'wicked' when judged by the Biblical standard, would be included in the coming kingdom. This attitude, which must have made him appear to be arrogantly impious, sets him apart from his contemporaries."<sup>26</sup>

Over the centuries Christian tradition has developed a sense of being called to a life of obedient faith, but struggling with sin and failure all along the way. Luther's notion of *simul justus et peccator* (both justified and sinner) describes well the situation of the faithful. Most Christian traditions have a regular confession of sin, followed by an affirmation of forgiveness, structured into the worship service.<sup>27</sup> And within Jewish tradition the notion of the *yetzer hara* (the evil impulse, like the little devil on the shoulder egging one on) remains a significant concept.<sup>28</sup> The challenge is not to give in to the evil impulse. The Apostle Paul reflects something of this tradition when in his letter to the Romans he laments, "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me" (7:19–20). Thus even the faithful remain ever the penitent.<sup>29</sup>

### LISTING SIN

Part of a taxonomy of sin involves rehearsing something of the different ways in which sin was developed in the world of the earliest Christians, as well as how sin has been categorized today. While the Apostle Paul could write about sin (especially *hamartia*) as a cosmic power that has the capacity to kill (Rom. 6), he could also reel off lists of particular sins, individual transgressions against which the faithful were warned. Such "vice lists" were

<sup>26</sup> Sanders, "Jesus and the Sinners," 29. By contrast, see Hägerland, "Jesus and the Rites of Repentance," 166–187.

<sup>27</sup> See J. Berkman, "Being Reconciled: Penitence, Punishment, and Worship," *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, ed. S. Hauerwas and S. Wells (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), 95–111.

<sup>28</sup> On the notion of the *yetzer hara* in Jewish tradition, see F. C. Porter's, "The *Yeçer hará*: A Study in the Jewish Doctrine of Sin," *Biblical and Semitic Studies* (New York: Scribner's, 1901), 93–158; S. Schechter, *Some Aspects of Rabbinic Theology* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961; originally published in 1936); and G.F. Moore, *Judaism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927), vol. 1: 479–493.

<sup>29</sup> On the history of penance, see especially the collection of K. Rahner's essays in *Theological Investigations XV: Penance in the Early Church* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1982).

part of the rhetorical stock and trade of the ancient Greco-Roman world, along with parallel “virtue lists.”<sup>30</sup> The vices were sins to be avoided, and the virtues were positive traits to be embraced. Indulging in vices would destroy the fabric of society, while upholding the virtues would make for a stable and honorable society. The New Testament is replete with both vice and virtue lists, though the vice lists are more heavily represented. The New Testament contains thirteen virtue lists, most of them in the letters.<sup>31</sup> By contrast, the New Testament contains twenty-three vice lists, again primarily in the letters.<sup>32</sup> The function of the vice lists was fairly straightforward: to exhort the faithful and strengthen their resolve to walk a virtuous path in faith rather than giving in to any of the sinful vices that would lead them away from God. A comparative sampling of some vice lists shows the generic character of the lists themselves:

<b>Romans 1:29–31</b>	<b>1 Corinthians 6:9–10</b>	<b>Galatians 5:19–21</b>
Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.	Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.	Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.

This kind of piling on of one sin after another was intended to have the effect of lumping various sins together (especially sins of the flesh), identifying the character of wicked behavior with a broad smear, and galvanizing the faithful to avoid all such sins. The early Christians did not, of course, invent such lists. Rather, they borrowed heavily from the Stoic moralists in particular. The early Christians were simply following the patterns already long

<sup>30</sup> See, e.g., J. Fitzgerald, “Virtue/Vice Lists,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 6:857–859; D.E. Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 194–196.

<sup>31</sup> 2 Cor. 6:6–8; Gal. 5:22–23; Eph. 4:32; 5:9; Phil. 4:8; Col. 3:12; 1Tim. 4:12; 6:11; 2 Tim. 2:22; 3:10; James 3:17; 1 Pet. 3:8; and 2 Pet. 1:5–7.

<sup>32</sup> Matt. 15:19; Mark 7:21–22; Rom. 1:29–31; 13:13; 1 Cor. 5:10–11; 6:9–10; 2 Cor. 6:9–10; 12:20–21; Gal. 5:19–21; Eph. 4:31; 5:3–5; Col. 3:5, 8; 1 Tim. 1:9–10; 2 Tim. 3:2–5; Titus 3:3; James 3:15; 1 Pet. 2:1; 4:3, 15; and Rev. 9:21; 21:8; 22:15.



established in Hellenistic Judaism, especially as represented in the writings of the Wisdom of Solomon (14:22–26) and in Philo (Philo Sacr. 20–27; Leg. All. 1.19.56; 2.23.24; Spec. Leg. 3.63). Such lists are also found in the writings of the sectarian Qumran community, where we find a condemnation of “greed, wickedness and lies, haughtiness and pride, falseness and deceit, cruelty and ill temper, folly and insolence, lustful deeds and lewdness, blindness of eye and dullness of ear, stiffness of neck and heaviness of heart” (1 QS 4:9–11).<sup>33</sup>

Another category of “sin” that has been current for several hundred years, especially in the Roman Catholic tradition, is the distinction between mortal sins and venial sins. As articulated in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “For a sin to be mortal, three conditions must together be met: ‘Mortal sin is sin whose object is grave matter and which is also committed with full knowledge and deliberate consent.’”<sup>34</sup> By contrast, “one commits *venial sin* when, in a less serious matter, he does not observe the standard prescribed by the moral law, or when he disobeys the moral law in a grave matter, but without full knowledge or without complete consent” (para. 1862).<sup>35</sup> The distinction between mortal and venial sin functions to acknowledge gradations of greater and lesser sins. Appeals to a biblical warrant for such gradations often refer to Deuteronomy 25:1–2: “Suppose two persons have a dispute and enter into litigation, and the judges decide between them, declaring one to be in the right and the other to be in the wrong. If the one in the wrong deserves to be flogged, the judge shall make that person lie down and be beaten in his presence with the number of lashes proportionate to the offense.” The notion of a punishment proportionate to the sin becomes crucial to the development of systems of penance and the restoration of the sinner to the community and to God.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Beyond virtue and vice lists, sin also came to be categorized in Christian tradition in terms of the so-called seven deadly sins. The listing of these seven sins (lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy, and pride) is credited to Gregory the Great toward the end of the sixth century CE. In the Roman Catholic tradition seven virtues arose over time as pairings to the seven sins: chastity, temperance, charity, diligence, patience, kindness, humility. Other virtue lists have also played a significant role in modern culture. The Boy Scout Law, for example, has the scout pledge to be “trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent.”

<sup>34</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para. 1857, with reference to the sixteenth-century Council of Trent (New York: Doubleday, 2012).

<sup>35</sup> Aquinas is among the earliest theologians to systematically develop the distinction between mortal and venial sins. See the essay by E. Sweeney, “Vice and Sin,” in S. Pope, ed., *The Ethics of Aquinas* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 151–168.

<sup>36</sup> See especially Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology*.

## SIN AND SICKNESS

Already in the Jewish scriptures a clear connection is often made between sin and physical illness. For example, the promise made in Deuteronomy 7:15 assures that covenant fidelity will result in good health (“The LORD will turn away from you every illness; all the dread diseases of Egypt that you experienced, he will not inflict on you, but he will lay them on all who hate you”). Similarly, God afflicted Jehoram, an unfaithful king of Judah, with an incurable bowel disease. “In course of time, at the end of two years, his bowels came out because of the disease, and he died in great agony” (2 Chron. 21:19). A clear connection between sin and sickness is drawn here. Physical illness could also, of course, have no relationship to sin – as perhaps best illustrated by the story of Job. Thus the causal relationship between sin and sickness seems evident in the case of those who are deemed unfaithful, whereas an allowance is made for innocent illness in the case of the righteous.

This same pattern linking sin and sickness continues in the New Testament. Three passages stand out in this regard. First, in the Gospel of John we read about a paralytic (John 5) who has been ill for some time. Jesus heals him, and then tells him, “See, you have been made well! Do not sin any more, so that nothing worse happens to you.” The connection and presumption is straightforward that sin can result in sickness. Similarly, John 9 relates the story of the healing of the man born blind, where the disciples begin the story by asking Jesus, “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” This time the response of Jesus does not presume a connection between physical malady and sin; rather, the man’s blindness is but an occasion for Jesus to demonstrate that he is the revealing light of the world. Jesus heals the man’s physical blindness, but the narrative serves even more to show the man’s progressive movement toward spiritual sight as contrasted with the spiritual blindness of the Pharisees who can only see, ironically, that Jesus sinned by healing the man on the Sabbath.

The third instance connecting sin and sickness comes from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, in which Paul addresses a host of problems that have arisen in the church there. In 1 Corinthians 11 Paul is more than a little annoyed that at the Lord’s Supper, which was originally part of a larger meal shared by the church community, some of the Corinthians are getting drunk and not waiting for all to assemble (11:21). It is because they have not celebrated this ritual meal properly, Paul says, that some of them have become ill and others have even died. “For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves. For this

reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died” (11:29–30). Here we find the ultimate connection between sin and sickness. The sin of some has led to death, even among the faithful who have not been acting all that faithful in relation to one another or in relation to God.<sup>37</sup>

Just as notions of sin have developed and changed through history, so have understandings of the relationship between sin and illness.<sup>38</sup> Whereas sin was often blamed for sickness from Christian antiquity up through the nineteenth century, the twentieth century has seen a significant shift away from any causal relationship between sin and sickness. Indeed, the concept of “sin” itself has often been replaced by psychological and biological explanations for any behavior that violates human relationships. Whereas toward the beginning of the twentieth century it was not uncommon for behavioral scientists and counselors to still draw connections between deviance and moral guilt (and hence sin), as the century progressed psychologists, psychiatrists, and psychobiologists increasingly disassociated moral culpability from deviant behavior. Instead, individuals were seen as having mental or biological conditions for which they bore no personal responsibility, no moral agency. Since the behavior was pathological and not voluntary in the traditional understanding of freedom, the individual could not be held accountable in any real sense. As poet Phyllis McGinley once noted, “Sin has always been an ugly word, but it has been made so in a new sense over the last half-century. It has been made not only ugly but passé. People are no longer sinful, they are only immature or underprivileged or frightened or, more particularly, sick.”<sup>39</sup>

This shift among behavioral scientists led the prominent psychiatrist Karl Menninger, who established the famous Menninger Clinic, to write the book *Whatever Became of Sin?*<sup>40</sup> Menninger lamented the near evaporation of language that associated particular behaviors with sin and moral guilt or responsibility. His concern for the devaluation of individual responsibility by blaming a psychological or biological condition was all the more significant since Menninger himself had long argued for the decriminalization of

<sup>37</sup> On the relation of sin, sickness, and healing in early Christianity, see J. Pilch, *Healing in the New Testament* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 1–38.

<sup>38</sup> See A. Porterfield, *Healing in the History of Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>39</sup> “In Defense of Sin,” *The Province of the Heart* (London: Catholic Book Club, 1959), 35–36. Phyllis McGinley was a Pulitzer prize-winning poet, essayist, and children’s author. See also J. Portmann, “Sin Fatigue: The Dilution and Demotion of Sin,” in his *A History of Sin*, 3–31. Portmann nicely describes the “venialization of sin” (p. 5) and how older sins of masturbation and usury, e.g., have lost their relevance (pp. 83–98).

<sup>40</sup> New York: Bantam Books, 1973. See also D. Kelsey, “Whatever Happened to the Doctrine of Sin?,” *Theology Today* 50:2 (1993): 169–178.

mental illness.<sup>41</sup> Commenting on the medical model of human weakness in place of the language of sin, Barbara Brown Taylor has written:

When sickness is substituted for sin, then illness becomes the metaphor for human failing. We receive diagnosis instead of judgment, treatment instead of penance . . . Since we did not deform ourselves, we cannot re-form ourselves. What we need is a compassionate physician who is not repelled by our disease and who will never stop trying to heal us.<sup>42</sup>

The general cultural movement away from the language of “sin” over the last two generations, and particularly the strong shift away from associating sin and sickness (physical or mental), has significance for the study of Jesus and sin. If the entire notion of sin has indeed become passé for many, what effect does such a development have on the religious understanding of Jesus as sinless? While it is important to be careful about anachronistically reading modern understandings back onto ancient texts, it is also important to be aware when foundational religious concepts have significantly shifted in meaning and value. Thus, the Christian tradition is ever in the business of making its past foundational and authoritative texts meaningful in new contexts. While the language of “sin” remains crucial to millions of more traditionally conservative Christians who would identify with the evangelical movement, the so-called mainstream Protestant tradition has much more ambivalent attitudes toward the historic language associated with the term “sin.” In either case, it will be important to be aware of this contemporary dynamic in any discussion of Jesus as “sinner.” As I will argue at length in the final chapter, a metaphorical understanding of the term “sinless” as applied to Jesus is much more helpful than more literal and ontological renderings of Jesus as “sinless.”

### SIN AND IMPURITY

One of the most commonly misunderstood aspects of sin in early Judaism at the time of Jesus (especially by Christians today) is the relationship between

<sup>41</sup> See D. Capps’ analysis of Menninger’s work in *The Depleted Self: Sin in a Narcissistic Age* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1991), 1–10 (5–6).

<sup>42</sup> *Speaking of Sin: The Lost Language of Salvation* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 2000), 54. Taylor notes that this language is commonly used in more liberal forms of Protestantism, a kind of “no-fault” theology of sin. By contrast, more conservative forms of Protestantism adopt a legal model: “In the legal model, the basic human problem is not called sin or sickness but crime . . . When crime is substituted for sin, then lawlessness becomes the metaphor for human failing. The answer is not medicine but a swift dose of justice” (*Speaking of Sin*, 55–56). This approach, says Taylor, lends itself to a kind of “full-fault theology” grounded in an understanding of sin as willful disobedience (p. 57).

sin and impurity. Not infrequently does one find the claim that ritual impurity was a kind of sin in Judaism.<sup>43</sup> Such an assertion not only can be very misleading, but, in fact, is simply wrong. It is precisely in this context that the distinction between *moral* impurity (a.k.a. “sin”) and *ritual* impurity needs to be made clear. Ritual impurity had primarily to do with a variety of laws that regulated entry into the Temple precincts in Jerusalem and participation in Temple sacrificial rituals (Lev. 11–15, Num. 19). Somebody who might be considered morally impure, sinful, could at the same time be ritually pure or clean. Similarly, someone who was ritually impure or unclean was most often considered to be at the same time morally upright. Indeed, the act of intentionally taking on ritual impurity to fulfill the moral obligations of the Jewish law was considered faithful, natural, and appropriate, such as in the case of having corpse impurity from burying one’s father. It is also the case that certain sins could have a defiling effect, so that moral impurity could invoke a form of ritual impurity (e.g., particularly grievous sins could pollute the land), but it is important not to blur the lines either too quickly or completely between moral impurity and ritual impurity.

Two cases of ritual impurity in early Judaism can illustrate how the system worked: corpse impurity and impurity from menstruation. Neither condition was an indication of sin, but in neither condition could one be involved in the worship life of Judaism associated with the Jerusalem Temple. Corpse impurity is addressed in Numbers 19:11–14. The text reads as follows:

Those who touch the dead body of any human being shall be unclean seven days.

They shall purify themselves with the water on the third day and on the seventh day, and so be clean; but if they do not purify themselves on the

<sup>43</sup> See, e.g., the critique of M. Borg’s *Jesus: A New Vision* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1987) and his *Conflict, Holiness, and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998) in J. Klawans, *Impurity and Sin*, p. 144–145, and in P. Fredriksen, “Did Jesus Oppose the Purity Laws?,” *BR* 95:2 (1995): 20–25, 42–47. Portmann overstates the connection between ritual and moral impurity (*A History of Sin*, 18); on the relation of impurity and sin in early Judaism, see especially A. Büchler, *Studies in Sin and Atonement in the Rabbinic Literature of the First Century* (1927); G. Alon, “The Bounds of the Laws of Levitical Cleanness,” in *Jews, Judaism, and the Classical World* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1977; originally published in 1937), 190–234; and M. Douglas’s *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Praeger, 1966). See also J. Klawans, *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); J. Klawans, *Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple: Symbolism and Supersessionism in the Study of Ancient Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); H. Maccoby, *Ritual and Morality: The Ritual Purity System and Its Place in Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); and J. Neusner, *The Idea of Purity in Ancient Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 1973).

third day and on the seventh day, they will not become clean. All who touch a corpse, the body of a human being who has died, and do not purify themselves, defile the tabernacle of the LORD; such persons shall be cut off from Israel. Since water for cleansing was not dashed on them, they remain unclean; their uncleanness is still on them. This is the law when someone dies in a tent: everyone who comes into the tent, and everyone who is in the tent, shall be unclean seven days.

As E.P. Sanders points out in his discussion of corpse impurity, there was nothing at all wrong with contracting corpse impurity, especially since piety required the care of the dead.<sup>44</sup> The only exception to this rule was in relation to the priests whose responsibility it was to conduct the appropriate rituals in the Temple. Thus they could contract corpse impurity only in cases of the death of close relatives.<sup>45</sup> This restriction was intended to make it easier for the priests to conduct the affairs of the Temple without too many interruptions. There was certainly debate among the early rabbis about the extent of corpse impurity (e.g., Did it extend to the room above where a dead person lay? Could it be contracted by overshadowing a corpse without touching it?). But there was no problem with contracting corpse impurity, as long as one purified him- or herself with the appropriate ritual washings. The only transgression would be to enter into the Temple precincts without having first cleansed oneself for the seven days according to the law as spelled out in Numbers 19.

The second type of ritual impurity is menstruation. In general, a person contracted impurity through a bodily discharge (e.g., semen) or if one came into contact with blood. This made menstruation a matter of particular concern.<sup>46</sup> The laws governing impurity from menstruation are found in Leviticus 15:19–20: “When a woman has a discharge of blood that is her regular discharge from her body, she shall be in her impurity for seven days, and whoever touches her shall be unclean until the evening. Everything upon which she lies during her impurity shall be unclean; everything also upon which she sits shall be unclean” (see also Lev. 18:19; 20:18).<sup>47</sup> A woman

<sup>44</sup> See the discussion in *Jewish Law from Jesus to the Mishnah* (London/Philadelphia: SCM Press/Trinity Press International, 1990), 33–35. There is much debate regarding the rationale for corpse impurity among the rabbis.

<sup>45</sup> Lev. 21:1–2 states: “No one [among the priests] shall defile himself for a dead person among his relatives, except for his nearest kin: his mother, his father, his son, his daughter, his brother.”

<sup>46</sup> See Maccoby, *Ritual and Morality*, 30–46.

<sup>47</sup> The rationale for the impurity of menstruation may be connected to the sacred character of blood. As Lev. 17:10–11 states, “If anyone of the house of Israel or of the aliens who reside among them eats any blood, I will set my face against that person who eats blood, and will

cleanses herself from this impurity by bathing in a *mikvah*, a ritual bath, during which she also recites certain prayers and blessings. It is the woman's obligation to keep track of her menstrual cycle and to act accordingly in relation to the matter of ritual purity. Again, as in the case of corpse impurity, there is absolutely nothing sinful about contracting impurity through menstruation. It is an expected and normal part of life.

Though there are some occasions where a connection is drawn between ritual impurity and sin, especially at Qumran,<sup>48</sup> the rabbis tended to compartmentalize ritual impurity from the concept of sin. "Sin does not produce ritual impurity, and ritual impurity does not render one sinful."<sup>49</sup> Thus, claims that link sin with ritual impurity are generally ill-founded. This observation will be significant for our discussion of Jesus and sin, especially since Jesus is often viewed as having violated the laws of ritual purity.

#### SIN AND MOVING TARGETS

The root meaning of the Greek term for sin, *hamartanō*, as we recall, has to do with "missing the mark," or "missing the target." This presumes that one knows what the mark or target is. But what happens when the target is a moving target? Over the centuries the "target" that defines what is virtuous or what is sinful has shifted in various ways. Each new generation of the faithful seeks to interpret and define the boundaries of sin in ways that are most in keeping with living out faith in new and changing situations.

Sin is not static, a mere list of actions to avoid; rather, it is defined by a dynamic set of boundaries that is highly contextual, that develops and shifts through time and circumstance. Examples of changing understandings of sin abound, but two illustrations can suffice here. First, Veronika Grimm has helpfully traced changing attitudes toward food in early Christianity in her book *From Feasting to Fasting, the Evolution of a Sin: Attitudes to Food in Late Antiquity*.<sup>50</sup> Grimm illustrates the evolution of feasting to the status of a sin, and fasting to the status of a virtue, by

cut that person off from the people. For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you for making atonement for your lives on the altar; for, as life, it is the blood that makes atonement."

<sup>48</sup> See Klawans, *Impurity and Sin*, 67–91, and H. Harrington, *The Impurity Systems of Qumran and the Rabbis: Biblical Foundations* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1993). As Klawans notes, "Ritual and moral impurity were melded into a single conception of defilement, which had both ritual and moral ramifications" (*Impurity and Sin*, 90).

<sup>49</sup> Klawans, *Impurity and Sin*, 117. <sup>50</sup> New York: Routledge, 1996.

contrasting two radically different approaches to food: in the first century by the Acts of the Apostles, and in the fourth century by Jerome. In Acts 2:46 we read how the earliest Christians “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers . . . Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts.” Here the image of sharing and eating food with glad hearts reflects a form of feasting that positively anticipates the heavenly banquet to come. This positive motif of feasting has a significant place in the earliest Christian writings (see, e.g., Matt. 22:2–4, 9; 25:10; Luke 5:29; 12:36; 14:8).

By contrast, some three hundred years later, Jerome (perhaps best known for translating the Bible into the Latin Vulgate) could write a letter in which he confessed his deep respect for one Paula: “Of all the ladies in Rome but one had power to subdue me, and that one was Paula. She mourned and fasted, she was squalid with dirt, her eyes were dim from weeping . . . The psalms were her only songs, the Gospel her whole speech, continence her one indulgence, fasting the staple of her life. No other could give me pleasure but one whom I never saw eating food” (Epistle 45.3).<sup>51</sup> Here the virtuous life finds evidence in ascetic fasting. Denial of the body to uplift the spirit came increasingly to define the saint, whereas feasting came to be associated with gluttony and excess. And so we see, to use Grimm’s expression, the “evolution of a sin.”

A second example comes from more recent times. In 2008 Monsignor Gianfranco Girotti, the Regent of the Vatican’s Apostolic Penitentiary (known commonly as the “office of sin and penance”) announced that some new sins were increasingly entering human society as a result of globalization and modernization. Speaking to the Italian newspaper *L’Osservatore Romano* Girotti stated: “If yesterday sin had a rather individualistic dimension, today it has a value and resonance that is above all social, because of the great phenomenon of globalization.” He also added that sin “is not only stealing or coveting another man’s wife, it is also destroying the environment.” This emphasis on the “new sins” of global communities, and not just of individuals, especially against the environment, marks a significant shift toward updating the traditional notion of sin for the Roman Catholic Church. This change stands out all the more because of the Church’s traditional emphasis on teaching unchanging truth. Thus even an official body within the Vatican that has oversight over sin and penance can reflect

<sup>51</sup> See *From Feasting to Fasting*, 1.



on how understandings of sin have changed and developed over time in response to new circumstances. The Roman Catholic Church is not alone in making such a change. My own faith tradition, the Presbyterian Church (USA), in its 1983 Brief Statement of Faith, articulates its confession of sin with the following words:

But we rebel against God;  
we hide from our Creator.  
Ignoring God's commandments,  
we violate the image of God in others and ourselves,  
accept lies as truth, exploit neighbor and nature,  
and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care.  
We deserve God's condemnation.

Here also we can see a new concern with human "rebellion" against God as expressed in the exploitation of nature and in threatening to destroy the planet through human agency. The term "sin" does not occur in the statement, though it is clearly implied in the successor cognate terms of "rebel," "violate," "exploit," and "threaten." This more cosmic and social understanding of human sin is a far cry from the emphasis on individual sin that has dominated the Protestant tradition's understanding of sin since the days of the Reformation, through Luther, Calvin, the Westminster catechism, and beyond. The shift from a personal to a more corporate conception of sin is thus reflected across the Christian tradition.

The changing understanding of sin, the reprioritizing of various sins (e.g., the relative downplaying of usury in recent times as a significant sin), and the development of "new" sins all point to ways in which sin involves a moving target. Not only sins against the environment, but sins of socio-political oppression, sexism, racism, and homophobia, among others, have gained currency in the modern age. One can only imagine what new sins will develop as the twenty-first century progresses.<sup>52</sup>

#### RITUAL AND LITURGICAL SIN

An important aspect of a taxonomy of sin involves how sin is dealt with and removed (or at least checked) by means of ritual actions in liturgical contexts. In both Jewish and Christian traditions such ritual and liturgical mechanisms are crucial to the whole structure of dealing effectively with

<sup>52</sup> On such "new" sins, see Portmann, *A History of Sin*, 121–153, and K. Carmichael, *Sin and Forgiveness: New Responses in a Changing World* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 48–70.

sin.<sup>53</sup> The rituals have certainly changed and developed over time, but the response to sin through worship of God has been and continues to be a significant feature of human reflection on sin.

To take but two examples of such ritual practice, one from Jewish tradition and one from Christian tradition, we can consider the observance of Yom Kippur and Ash Wednesday, respectively. The legislation for Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) goes back to ancient Israel and the time of the first Temple, Solomon's Temple. Leviticus 16 (see also Lev. 23:26–32) spells out the specific rites with which this most serious of holy days should be observed.<sup>54</sup> In antiquity the ritual of Yom Kippur had two parts, closely related, and both revolving around the High Priest and the sacrificial system of the Jerusalem Temple. The first part called for the High Priest to sacrifice a young bull as a sin offering for himself, to make atonement for himself and his household (16:6, 11). He sprinkled some of the blood of the bull on the front of the mercy seat that covered the ark of the covenant to cleanse it from the pollution of sin.<sup>55</sup> He then sacrificed a goat for a sin offering on behalf of the people, also sprinkling its blood on and before the mercy seat (16:15). The High Priest then atoned for the sanctuary, the tent of meeting, and the altar itself, all to rid the Temple of what amounted to “sin buildup,” the pollution of sins from the previous year that had been forgiven by means of sacrifice. “He shall sprinkle some of the blood on [the horns of the altar] with his finger seven times, and cleanse it and hallow it from the uncleannesses of the people of Israel” (16:19).

The second part entailed the High Priest taking a goat that had been chosen by lot from among two goats (the other goat was sacrificed). The High Priest is then instructed to “lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their

<sup>53</sup> See G.M. Lukken, *Original Sin in the Roman Liturgy* (Leiden: Brill, 1973). On penitential prayer in Second Temple Judaism, see *Seeking the Favor of God*, vol. 2: *The Development of Penitential Prayer in Second Temple Judaism*, M.J. Boda, D. Falk, and R. Werline, eds. (Atlanta, GA/Leiden: Society of Biblical Literature/Brill, 2007).

<sup>54</sup> On the Levitical legislation, see especially the commentary by J. Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book of Rituals and Ethics* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2004), 162–174; as well as J. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16* (New York: Doubleday, 1991). On early Christian reinterpretation of Yom Kippur, see J.S. Siker, “Yom Kippuring Passover: Recombinant Sacrifice in Early Christianity,” in C. Eberhardt, ed., *Ritual and Metaphor: Sacrifice in the Bible* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 2011), 65–82. See also D. Stökl Ben Ezra, *The Impact of Yom Kippur on Early Christianity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), and T. Hieke and T. Niklas, eds., *The Day of Atonement: Its Interpretation in Early Jewish and Christian Traditions* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

<sup>55</sup> During the time of the Second Temple, when the ark of the covenant was no longer present, the mercy seat was an area in the Temple where the ark would have been.

transgressions, all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat” (16:21). The goat was then led away from the Temple into the wilderness, bearing on itself “all their iniquities to a barren region” (16:22). The goat was released in the wilderness and was left to die. (In later rabbinic tradition the goat was hurled off a cliff.) With this two-part ritual the sin of the people of Israel was removed and the Temple was now cleansed and ready for another year of sacrifice as commanded in the law of Moses.

With the destruction of the second Temple in 70 CE the Jews in Palestine had to invent a new tradition for dealing with sin that did not involve ritual sacrifice, since the Temple was no longer standing. The rabbis developed a renewed ritual practice that focused on the prayers of the people, and penitential rites whereby the people confessed their sins and sought forgiveness from anyone they had wronged during the previous year. The rabbis also addressed the Yom Kippur observance with a dedicated tractate *Yoma* in the Mishnah, the third-century collection of oral traditions that regulated Jewish life and practice.<sup>56</sup> Prayer and fasting replaced sacrifice. The penitential psalms and such confessions of sin as found in Daniel 9:5–16 became models for prayerful confession.

The Christian tradition of Ash Wednesday likely dates from the late ninth or tenth century CE.<sup>57</sup> Although it is very different from Yom Kippur, Ash Wednesday serves as the focal point in the liturgical year for Christian reflection on personal and corporate sin. In this way Ash Wednesday, and the season of Lent that follows, serves a parallel purpose to Yom Kippur in the Jewish tradition. The idea of ashes as a sign of sorrow or repentance can be found in various places within the Jewish scriptures (2 Sam. 13:19; Job 2:8; Dan. 9:3; 1 Macc. 3:47). The prophet Jeremiah laments the sin of the people that will eventually lead to the Babylonian onslaught against Judah and with it the destruction of the Temple and the exile into Babylon (Jer 6:26):

O my poor people, put on sackcloth, and roll in ashes;  
make mourning as for an only child, most bitter lamentation:  
for suddenly the destroyer will come upon us.

Repentance is associated with sackcloth and ashes also in the preaching of Jesus, as he warns: “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the

<sup>56</sup> See G. Stemmerger, “Yom Kippur in Mishnah Yoma,” in Hieke and Niklas, *The Day of Atonement*, 121–138.

<sup>57</sup> The Synod of Beneventum (1091 CE), held under Pope Urban II, refers to the penitential anointing with ashes of both lay and clergy.

deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes” (Matt. 11:21). Reflection on repentance and the recollection of one’s baptismal vows became an important feature of Christian liturgical practice. The initiation of a new member into the community through baptism became an occasion for all to reaffirm their baptismal promises, to repent of sin, and to turn to God anew.

As Christian tradition developed in medieval times Ash Wednesday was marked by a liturgy during which the foreheads of the faithful were ritually marked by ashes in the form of the cross, to remember Jesus’ salvific sacrificial death on behalf of human sin. The death of Jesus was called all the more into view as the palms from the Palm Sunday liturgy were (and are) typically burned, and the ashes from the palms were used for the ritual marking of the forehead. In this way not only human sinfulness and mortality in general, but human sinfulness that led to the death of Jesus is especially emphasized. Indeed, over the centuries Christians have often identified Jesus with the scapegoat from the Leviticus 16 Yom Kippur ritual, in which the scapegoat bore away the sins of the people. A further connection involves the practice of fasting in relation to reflection on sin and repentance. As the practice of fasting became an important part of the Yom Kippur observance, so did fasting become a regular ritual observance associated with Ash Wednesday and the season of Lent.<sup>58</sup>

Beyond such central rituals as the observance of Yom Kippur and Ash Wednesday, sin makes significant appearances in other liturgical aspects of the regular worship life of Jews and Christians. Within the Christian tradition in particular it is common to find confessions of sin in the weekly liturgy, followed by an assurance of God’s pardon. Many hymns that are sung also include heavy doses of sin and repentance. In the Protestant tradition the hymns written by Charles Wesley in the eighteenth century and Fanny Crosby in the nineteenth century come especially to mind as focusing the attention of the worshipers on their sinfulness and need for repentance.<sup>59</sup> The classic hymn “The Old Rugged Cross,” written by evangelist George Bennard in 1912, still popular in evangelical Christian circles to this day, calls attention to the repentant sinner’s indebtedness to the atoning death of Jesus:

<sup>58</sup> Significantly, Acts 27:9 can refer to the observance of Yom Kippur simply as “the Fast” (*nesteia*).

<sup>59</sup> Such hymns as Wesley’s “Come, Sinners, to the Gospel Feast” and “Sinners, Turn: Why Will You Die?” and Crosby’s “Though Your Sins Be as Scarlet” and “Yes, There Is Pardon for You” are but a few of the dozens of hymns that emphasize sin and redemption.

And I love that old cross  
 where the dearest and best  
 For a world of lost sinners was slain.

The recitation of the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9–13) is also, of course, a regular feature of Christian worship services. While there is no explicit mention of sin in the prayer, there is a twofold reference to forgiveness: "Forgive us our debts [trespasses], as we forgive our debtors [those who trespass against us]" (Matt. 6:12).<sup>60</sup> In all of these ways and more, the liturgical and ritual context in which sin functions is a very important aspect of a taxonomy of sin.

### PERFECT PEOPLE?

One final feature of this taxonomy that warrants attention, especially as we approach this examination of Jesus as perfect and sinless, is the presence in the Jewish and early Christian traditions of righteous individuals who were so righteous that they were considered sinless. The appellation of sinlessness is rare indeed in early Jewish and Christian tradition. While Jesus calls on his followers to be "perfect" (*teleios*) as their heavenly Father is perfect (Matt. 5:48), the term *teleios* has the nuance of being a goal toward which one should strive.<sup>61</sup> As we saw above, on becoming part of the Christian faith community the expectation was that believers would not be guilty of sin, or at least any significant sin. But there was never the notion that any believer was sinless from birth on.

We might think of such characters in the Jewish scriptures as the mysterious figure Melchizedek (Gen. 14:18; Ps. 110:4), a character who the author of Hebrews goes out of his way to identify as one without genealogy (Heb. 7:3), and therefore a semi-divine figure who prefigures the coming of Jesus. Indeed, as we will see further below, Hebrews develops Jesus as a priest after the order of Melchizedek, in contrast to the Aaronic priesthood associated with the Jerusalem Temple.<sup>62</sup> We might also think of a figure such as Elijah,

<sup>60</sup> On the history of interpretation of the Lord's Prayer, see K. Stevenson, *The Lord's Prayer: A Text in Tradition* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2004).

<sup>61</sup> See also Wisdom 9:6: "even one who is perfect among human beings will be regarded as nothing without the wisdom that comes from you." Heb. 2:10 speaks of Jesus being made "perfect through sufferings" (*dia pathēmātōn teleiōsai*), and Heb. 5:9 can refer to Jesus as "having been made perfect" (*teleiōtheis*).

<sup>62</sup> Speculation about Melchizedek seems to have played an important role in the Qumran writings, especially 11 Q Melch. See L. Hurst, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: Its Background of Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 43–66. See further P. Kobelski, *Melchizedek and Melchiresa* (Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1981).

a mighty prophet who was so filled with God's Spirit that at the end of his career he was taken up in a whirlwind on a chariot of fire into the heavens (2 Kings 2:11). But even this glorified Elijah (who in the New Testament will appear with Moses and Jesus in the story of the Transfiguration, Mark 9) is still gently scolded by God for hiding in a cave because he feels all alone and sorry for himself (1 Kings 19), but this would not seem to be a sin per se. Thus, while Elijah also has close links to the divine and the heavenly realm, he still remains an imperfect human figure, albeit an apocalyptic figure who will be the precursor of the messiah, and for whom the door is still left open every Passover.

In addition to such figures as Melchizedek and Elijah, there is one hero of the faith in particular who was revered as sinless, at least in some quarters: Abraham. The figure of Abraham occupies a particularly crucial place as a mediating figure between the human and the divine.<sup>63</sup> Abraham is the foundational figure of the covenant tradition of descendants, land, and blessing on the nations. Abraham trusts God and is deemed righteous on account of his faith (Gen. 15:6). Abraham intercedes with God on behalf of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, bargaining God down to not destroying the cities if only ten righteous individuals can be found (Gen. 18; alas, not). A rich man who has ignored poor Lazarus outside his gate dies and goes straight to hell (and Lazarus straight to the bosom of Abraham), and then pleads with Abraham to no avail to send Lazarus to comfort him in his misery (Luke 16). And Abraham is the father of Jew and Gentile alike, according to Paul, as Abraham was not only the first Jew, but also the first convert to Judaism as he destroyed the idols his father Terah had made, according to the book of Jubilees. Abraham the righteous. Abraham the merciful. Abraham the faithful.

And yet, also Abraham the harsh judge – at least according to the apocryphal Testament of Abraham.<sup>64</sup> The Testament of Abraham relates the story of God sending the archangel Michael to prepare Abraham for his death and to have him prepare a will. But Abraham refuses to surrender his soul to Michael, and he exacts a pledge from Michael (who has consulted with God) to take him on a tour of the world in a heavenly chariot, after which he will consent and give up his soul. But the tour does not turn out

<sup>63</sup> For a discussion of Abraham in early Jewish and Christian tradition, see J.S. Siker, *Disinheriting the Jews: Abraham in Early Christian Controversy* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1991).

<sup>64</sup> The Testament of Abraham is typically dated to the last half of the first century CE. See E.P. Sanders, "The Testament of Abraham," in *Outside the Old Testament*, ed. M. de Jonge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 56–59.

very well, at least for the humans Abraham encounters. Every time Abraham sees people engaged in sin he speaks against them and they die (devoured by wild beasts, swallowed up by the earth, destroyed by a heavenly fire). But then the voice of God speaks to Michael:

Prince Michael, bid the chariot stand still and stop Abraham from seeing the whole of the earth. For if he sees all those who are engaged in sin, he will destroy every living thing. For lo, Abraham has not sinned, and he has no pity for sinners. But I have made the world, and I have no wish to destroy any of the men I have created; but I put off the sinner's death until he turns again and lives. Take Abraham up to the first gate of heaven, so that he may view the judgments and the retributions there, and repent for the sinners' souls he has destroyed.<sup>65</sup> (Testament of Abraham 10:15–19)

In the Testament of Abraham the tables have been turned a bit. God has to intervene with Abraham to spare human life. God is the merciful one, and Abraham the harsh judge. Because Abraham has not sinned he has no mercy for sinners. Especially interesting is God's command for Michael to take Abraham to view the judgments and retributions against those whom Abraham has killed, that this sinless Abraham might repent for destroying the souls of sinners. As the narrative continues Abraham does, indeed, repent. And so his sinlessness is capped off with his own repentance and mercy after all. The notion of the sinless Abraham repenting of what amounts to his sin of having no mercy is striking. He sins by judging sinners, even though he does so from the vantage of his own righteous sinlessness. But the truly sinless, at least here, is the one who shows mercy toward sinners.

Beyond Abraham, were there others who were considered not only righteous but also sinless? The very distinction between "righteousness" and "sinlessness" raises the interesting question of what the difference between the two might be. Was righteousness tantamount to being sinless? Was righteousness functional sinlessness? As I will argue in the chapters that follow, the notion of sinlessness became important in early Christianity as an exclusive descriptor for Jesus because of the association of sinlessness with being unblemished, which in turn was linked to the sacrificial system of the day. The blending of moral and ritual categories, thus, was crucial not only at Qumran, but also in the retrospective theologizing of the earliest Christians.

<sup>65</sup> The translation is by N. Turner in H.F.D. Sparks, ed., *The Apocryphal Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 393–421. See also Neale, *None but the Sinner*, 90–92.

But back to the question: Were others considered sinless? The apostle Paul can describe himself in regard to “righteousness under the law, blameless [*amemptos*]” (Phil. 3:6).<sup>66</sup> Thus Paul tells the Philippians that he kept the law without blemish. Paul clearly did not see himself as sinless (Rom. 7), but it is significant that he can state without any apparent problem that he was able to keep the Jewish law.<sup>67</sup> The birth narrative in Luke also refers to Elizabeth and Zechariah (the parents of John the Baptist) as “righteous before God, living blamelessly (*amemptoi*) according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord” (Luke 1:6).<sup>68</sup> The term also appears several times in the Septuagint, describing Abraham (Gen. 17:1) and Job (Job 1:1, 8; 2:3) as upright and blameless.

Another term that is translated often as “blameless” or “unblemished” is the word *amōmos*. This word is used most often in the Septuagint to refer to unblemished animals in the context of sacrifice (23 times in Leviticus; 22 times in Numbers) though it also finds its way into the Psalms referring to an innocent and upstanding life (e.g., Pss. 15:2; 18:23). In the New Testament this term occurs only a few times but carries with it the same overtones associated with the sacrifice of an unblemished animal, or in a more metaphorical way to describe an upright life ( Eph. 1:4; 5:7; Phil. 2:15; Col. 1:22; Heb. 9:14; 1 Pet. 1:19).

Finally, it will be helpful here to rehearse briefly the various passages in the New Testament where Jesus is identified as sinless. We shall, of course, have occasion in the remaining chapters to discuss what such claims might mean, but it is important, nonetheless, simply to have an overview of the pertinent texts. There are five texts in the New Testament that make explicit claims about the sinlessness of Jesus. Though a contextual understanding of these passages will be important as we proceed, for now we can simply list them. They are as follows:

- 2 Corinthians 5:21: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”
- Hebrews 4:15: “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.”

<sup>66</sup> The NIV gives the somewhat tendentious translation “as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.”

<sup>67</sup> Paul’s self-description here comports well with an observation made years ago by K. Stendahl about Paul’s robust self-consciousness and esteem in the seminal article, “Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West,” *Harvard Theological Review* 56 (1963): 199–215.

<sup>68</sup> The other occurrences of the term in the New Testament may be found in Phil. 2:15 and 1 Thess. 3:13, where Paul encourages the faithful to maintain a blameless life before God. The final occurrence is in Heb. 8:7, where the Mosaic covenant is criticized as being at fault.



- 1 Peter 2:21–22: “Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. ‘He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.’”<sup>69</sup>
- 1 John 3:5: “You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin.”
- John 8:46: “Which of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me?” (This passage is less explicit, but the question presumes Jesus cannot be convicted of sin.)

One significant observation about these passages is that the term “sin” in each case is the root word for “sin” in Greek – *hamartia*. These various passages describe the sinlessness of Jesus in slightly different but related ways: he “knew” no sin, he is “without” sin, he “committed no sin,” in him there was “no sin,” and he cannot be “convicted” of sin. One fundamental question that will concern us as we proceed is what it means for these various authors to say that Jesus was sinless. A number of other passages imply the sinlessness of Jesus, and we will address these in the following chapters as well.

<sup>69</sup> 1 Pet. is quoting, with alterations, from Isa. 53:9. The Septuagint text of Isa. 53:9 reads: “although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.” 1 Pet. replaces “he had done no violence” with “he committed no sin.” The Hebrew *chamas* (“wrong,” “violence”) is rendered in the Septuagint with the Greek word *anomia* (“lawlessness”).

## From Sinful Birth to Virgin Birth

### INTRODUCTION: MEMORY AND BIRTH

The most important thing to note at the outset of this chapter is the surprising and counterintuitive fact that the birth stories about Jesus, which appear at the beginning of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, were actually the very last parts of the Gospels to be developed and written. This is truly a case of the last coming first, at least in terms of literary development. Far from reflecting historical narratives (for how could any historian assess such claims?) the birth stories fundamentally communicate Matthew and Luke's retrospective theological convictions. As we trace the process of retrospectively perfecting Jesus in early Christian tradition, we will see that the shift from associating the birth of Jesus with scandal and sin to viewing his birth as a miraculous act of divine intervention serves as one of the central pivots for Christian theological reflection from the origins of Christian faith to the present day.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The secondary literature on the birth of Jesus is vast. The most expansive study remains R.E. Brown's *The Birth of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1999). The commentary literature on Matt. 1–2 and Luke 1–2 also provides important resources. See especially W.D. Davies and D.C. Allison, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), vol. 1: 190–223; U. Luz, *Matthew 1–7* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1989), vol. 1: 113–127; J. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I–IX* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), 303–448; and J. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 47–158. See also R. Horsley, *The Liberation of Christmas: The Infancy Narratives in Social Context* (New York: Crossroad, 1989); J. G. Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (New York: Harper & Row, 1930; reprinted by Baker Book House, 1974); G. Lüdemann, *Virgin Birth?* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998); J. Spong, *Born of a Woman* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 1994); and J. Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1987). See also A.T. Lincoln, *Born of a Virgin? Reconceiving Jesus in the Bible, Tradition, and Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013).

Before we turn directly to tracing this shift it will be helpful to understand something about the function of birth stories in general, especially in antiquity, though many of the same sensibilities are still at work today. All of us have birth stories. Some of us know a great deal about the circumstances surrounding our birth. Some of us know virtually nothing. The circumstances of one's birth are typically seen as a kind of harbinger of what might lie ahead for each individual. One who is born to aristocratic privilege is viewed as having a significant advantage in several important social markers of life: wealth, rank, power. Pedigree and privilege go hand in hand. By contrast, one who is born "in unfortunate circumstances" is viewed as having significant obstacles to overcome in order to succeed in life. Especially in the cases of these extremes of birth, much about the life of the person as he or she grows up is often explained as the unfolding of the particular situation into which the person was born. One can "overcome" the circumstances of one's birth, just as one can fail to "live up to" one's birth.

Although birth stories are not necessarily linked to particular outcomes for one's life, in retrospect a person or a community often makes connections between the circumstances of one's birth and the life that has unfolded. For example, the birth narrative of President Barack Obama can be readily contrasted with the birth narrative of President George W. Bush. Whereas Bush clearly came from American aristocratic wealth and power, Obama was born into rather more humble circumstances. Indeed, Obama reflects quite openly about the significance of being the son of a white American woman and a black Kenyan man and how his biracial heritage contributed directly to his story.<sup>2</sup> As he looks back on his origins and his varied experiences growing up, partly in Indonesia, partly in Hawaii with his grandparents, he sees patterns emerging that both prepared and positioned him to take on the challenges of national leadership.

Such a narrative helps to show how stories of origins often only really become important in retrospect. They do not even get constructed into a firm narrative until there is a need for such a narrative. Birth stories certainly have tremendous potential meaning, but this meaning is most often filled out in hindsight. If no particularly significant connections are to be drawn between a person's life and the circumstances of his or her birth, then no elaboration is necessary. But when a person becomes an important historical figure, then people start trying to make sense of that life partly in light of whatever they might learn about the person's birth, their origins, their

<sup>2</sup> See B. Obama's *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004).

heritage. Origins then get projected retrospectively as destiny. We look to the past to look forward anew. This was certainly the case for Jesus. As some Christians have expressed it, “He was born to die.”<sup>3</sup> We will see a form of this claim in Matthew’s birth narrative (1:21).

The dotted line between origins and outcomes provides a trajectory of a life. And as much as it may appear that the trajectory moves from beginning to end, it actually goes the other way – from end to beginning. It goes backward. Why? Because this is how we perceive and make sense of life stories – from the perspective of the present looking back. We are fundamentally teleological creatures with a keen sense of personal history, whether continuous or fragmented. But teleology runs both forward and backward. For example, one who says “My life has not turned out as I had hoped” invokes a narrative from a perspective of the present situation looking back, not the other way around. We are always in the process of re-membering, quite literally, a story. And depending on the way a life has unfolded, and who is telling the story, the trajectory that is traced back to a set of origins will look one way or another.

In order to reflect on the origins of Jesus, and hence his birth, we begin by noting that if the resurrection demonstrated that Jesus was in some sense a divine figure, then surely this divine association must be traced back through his death, ministry, and baptism all the way to his birth. The vindication of the life of Jesus so clear in the resurrection narrative also necessitated the vindication of Jesus from any charges that associated his life with sin, starting with his birth. In what follows we will proceed by examining the evidence that Jesus was born in scandalous circumstances. From there we will move to see how belief in the saving power of Jesus’ death, proved by his resurrection, compelled the earliest Christians to recast completely the story about his origins.

#### SCANDALOUS SALVATION: THE BIRTH IN MATTHEW

Both the Gospels of Matthew and Luke preserve what appear to be clear historical memories that linked the birth of Jesus to scandal. This is especially the case with the Gospel of Matthew. Though there is no doubt that Matthew certainly believed that Jesus had been conceived and was born in a miraculous manner, a virgin birth, nonetheless Matthew also gives us various clues

<sup>3</sup> Some movie posters for the controversial Mel Gibson film *The Passion* (2004) used this slogan in advertising.

pointing to a tradition that links Jesus' birth uncomfortably close to sin. Three observations can be made about Matthew's birth narrative in this regard.

### *The Women of Matthew's Genealogy*

As has often been noted, the passing mention in the genealogy of four women linked to sexual scandal seems to have been a way of preparing the reader for another birth story amid sexual scandal – the birth of Jesus to Mary.<sup>4</sup> The references to Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and “the wife of Uriah” (note that her name, Bathsheba, is not used here, heightening the scandal) all invoke stories that the audience would have known from their sacred scriptures. Tamar plays a prostitute (Gen. 38:13–18) in order to secure her legitimate right to heirs according to the law of levirate marriage (Deut. 25:5–10), which her stepfather Judah has refused to honor (Gen. 38). Judah then unknowingly hires her services, after which Tamar becomes pregnant. When Judah hears that Tamar is pregnant, he accuses her of playing the harlot, with the consequence that she deserves to die (Gen. 38:24). At this dramatic juncture in the story Tamar produces the staff and ring with which Judah had paid her, identifying Judah as the father. Judah's comment says it all for Matthew: “She is more in the right than I am” (Gen. 38:26).<sup>5</sup> Apparent sexual scandal reveals instead a woman who is more righteous than the patriarch Judah.

Matthew invokes a second sexual scandal by referring to Rahab (1:5). Again, the reader or listener would be familiar with the story from Joshua 2, about the prostitute Rahab and how she hid the two Hebrew spies who had slipped in to Jericho to assess the military situation there before the army of the Hebrews attacked Jericho as part of taking possession of the Promised Land. Rahab proved to be upstanding in the eyes of God and the people, for she aided the people in their conquest of Jericho. Sexual scandal gives way to righteous action yet again.

The third sexual scandal occurs with the mentioning of the name Ruth (Matt. 1:5), about whom we learn from the Book of Ruth in the Hebrew Bible. The scandal is less overt in this case, but we again encounter a

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Davies and Allison, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, vol. 1: 161–190; Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 71–74.

<sup>5</sup> The motif of righteousness is central to Matthew's Gospel. By portraying Tamar as righteous, he links her to Jesus' earthly righteous father, Joseph (Matt. 1:19), as well as to important motifs of righteousness in Jesus' preaching (Matt. 3:15; 5:6, 10, 20; 6:33; 21:32). See B. Przybylski, *Righteousness in Matthew and His World of Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

righteous woman (Ruth) whose husband has died. Ruth, a Moabite woman, famously refuses to leave her mother-in-law Naomi and returns with her to Israel. There, after gleaning in the fields of Boaz, who is a kinsman of Naomi's (raising again the law of Levirate marriage), Ruth goes down to the threshing floor at night at the behest of Naomi, and she is rather forward with Boaz, seeking his protection, indeed inviting him to take her as his wife after the manner of Levirate marriage. She behaves in a sexually provocative manner, but the truth is that she is "a worthy woman" (Ruth 3:11).

Fourth, and finally, we come upon one of the most significant sexual scandals of the entire Hebrew Bible, as Matthew mentions "the wife of Uriah" (1:6). Simply by mentioning this phrase Matthew invokes an entire story complex about David and Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11). Matthew heightens the sexual scandal by making it clear that David committed adultery with another man's wife – Uriah's wife. Not only that, but when Bathsheba became pregnant David tried to get the soldier Uriah to go into his wife so that all would think the child was Uriah's. But Uriah is a faithful soldier (unlike the unfaithful David) and he refuses to go to his wife, spending the night instead at the gate of the King. David gives up and sends a note that Uriah is to take back to Joab, the commander of the army. The note tells Joab to make sure that Uriah dies in the next battle. For Matthew, this story about Israel's model righteous King and his seduction of "the wife of Uriah" points yet again to how God has used not only the appearance of sexual scandal (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth), but also actual sexual scandal to continue the lineage of David that culminates, for Matthew, with the birth of Jesus, the son of Abraham and son of David (Matt. 1:1).

All four of these women are dropped into the genealogy, breaking the rhythm of father-son-father-son-father-son with quite deliberate references to these women who carried on the line amid seeming sexual scandal.<sup>6</sup> All of this, of course, leads directly to the story of Jesus' birth to Mary. In her case the sexual scandal results from her becoming pregnant while betrothed to Joseph, but not yet living with him, not yet married (1:18).

### *Joseph the Righteous*

Beyond the four women who anticipate the overtones of sexual scandal inherent in the birth of Jesus, Matthew also bears witness to the sexual

<sup>6</sup> As has often been noted, the four women who appear in Matthew's genealogy are all non-Israelites who have married into the Israelite lineage. See Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 71–74.

scandal of the story in relation to the actions of Joseph. Matthew depicts Joseph as quietly seeking to divorce Mary, clearly suggesting that Joseph knew the child was not his.<sup>7</sup> And because Joseph was a righteous man (Matt. 1:19), he did not want to bring shame on himself or his family by marrying a young woman who so clearly had violated her betrothal.<sup>8</sup> Matthew indicates that Joseph's motivation was that he was "unwilling to expose her [Mary] to public disgrace" (1:19). One way to prevent shame from coming on Mary was simply to marry her, though Joseph apparently did not see this as an option, at least as Matthew tells the story. Had Joseph simply married Mary, even though she was already pregnant, there would have been no problem with the pregnancy, as Joseph would be the presumed father. The child would then be considered legitimate and of clear Jewish parentage. Joseph would have been perceived as having consummated the marriage prematurely, but this was a minor problem if he would claim the child as his own. But Joseph's plan to divorce Mary, even if quietly, indicates that he did not see this approach as an option, since the child was not his. Thus the real issue is the shame Mary's pregnancy would bring on Joseph and his family. And so, as a righteous man, Joseph did the honorable thing, that is, the honorable thing for him and his family. He planned to break off the betrothal since Mary was no longer an honorable bride-to-be.<sup>9</sup>

Whether this is an accurate version of events remains, of course, impossible to say. But it certainly fits within the storylines of Matthew's account, a kind of parallel narrative. Because Matthew has gone out of his way to include both the combination of apparently scandalous sexual encounters associated with prominent heroes of the faith and Joseph's determination that Mary has violated her betrothal through her own arguably sinful sexual behavior, it seems logical to conclude that Matthew had received some kind of tradition about the birth of Jesus that needed serious explanation. That explanation developed in the aftermath of Jesus' followers coming to believe

<sup>7</sup> See Deut. 22:23–29 on laws regulating betrothed women.

<sup>8</sup> In addition to 1:19, see also the motif of righteousness in Matt. 5:45; 9:13; 10:41; 13:17, 43, 49; 23:28–29, 35–37, 46.

<sup>9</sup> The second-century *Protoevangelium of James* imagines the anguish Joseph went through in trying to decide what to do (14:1): "And Joseph feared greatly and parted from her [Mary], pondering what he should do with her. And Joseph said, 'If I conceal her sin, I shall be found to be in opposition to the law of the Lord. If I expose her to the children of Israel, I fear lest that which is in her may be from the angels and I should be found delivering innocent blood to the judgement of death. What then shall I do with her? I will put her away secretly.'" J.K. Elliott, ed. and trans., *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 62.

that God had raised him from the dead.<sup>10</sup> And if God had so vindicated Jesus and his ministry from the shame of his death by crucifixion, then surely any charge of scandal in the birth of Jesus must also be vindicated. If the resurrection demonstrated that Jesus was in some sense a divine figure, then this divine association must be traced back to his birth.

Yes, Matthew wants to say, Jesus' birth was truly irregular, but not in the manner that some opponents of this fledgling Christian movement had apparently charged. Rather, his birth was irregular in that the very God of Israel, the Lord of all creation, had impregnated Mary by means of the divine Spirit. As Luke put it, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy" (1:35). This approach to the birth of Jesus makes ultimate claims about the identity and significance of Jesus. If Jesus is no mere human being, if the resurrection demonstrates that he has returned to the God from whence he came, then there must be a story of divine origin parallel to the story of being raised into the heavenly realm of God where Jesus sits at the right hand of God until he comes in judgment.<sup>11</sup> What had started in the historical birth narrative as a source of potential shame has become for the earliest Christians a theological claim to divine access beyond measure.

### *Mapping Resurrected Death onto Birth*

If the birth of Jesus carried with it potential shame, the death of Jesus was the locus of definite shame and tragedy for the followers of Jesus. Even the anticipation of his death was cause for distancing oneself from Jesus. Judas betrayed Jesus; the disciples scattered in the Garden of Gethsemane; Peter denied knowing Jesus. If Jesus were put to death, where would this leave the disciples? They could read a clear pattern from the death of John the Baptist to the death of Jesus to their own demise. The shame of Jesus' birth from this vantage seemed only parallel to the shame of his death, especially from the perspective of those who opposed Jesus. He was born amid scandal, and now he was dying under the condemnation of both Rome and the Jewish leaders. A sad and tragic end to such a promising and hopeful prophetic ministry.

<sup>10</sup> So also Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 29–32, 140–142. Against Brown, see Davies and Allison, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, vol. 1: 200–202.

<sup>11</sup> This is in reference to Ps. 110, which played a major role in early Christian tradition as a proof-text for the resurrection of Jesus. See Matt. 22:41–46; Mark 12:35–37; Acts 2:34; 1 Cor. 15:25; Heb. 1:13; 5:5–10. See the study by D.M. Hay, *Glory at the Right Hand: Psalm 110 in Early Christianity* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1973).



But everything changed with belief in the risen Jesus. And now new patterns began to emerge – not patterns of shame but patterns of divine agency overcoming human rejection. Not only does the resurrection raise Jesus from the grave, and a divine birth from scandal, but it also reads the meaning of the very death and resurrection of Jesus all the way back into the birth narrative. This can be seen most clearly in Matthew 1:21, in the naming of Jesus. After Joseph receives assurance from the angel of the Lord that the child Mary carries comes from the Holy Spirit, he is then instructed about how the child shall be named: “You are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (1:21). But *how* will he save his people from their sins? This question finds a clear answer in the passion narrative about Jesus, during his last supper with the disciples: “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt. 26:28). The same phrase found in Matthew 26 (“forgiveness of sins”) resonates strongly with the angelic announcement in the infancy narrative regarding Jesus’ destiny: “he will save his people from their sins.” The impending death of Jesus after the last supper, along with the reference to his blood, surely indicates that for Matthew the forgiveness of sins finds its locus in Jesus’ salvific death in the bright light of the resurrection.

The significance of Jesus’ death and resurrection is now read back into the significance of his birth itself. This is a child of destiny. Not only is Mary pregnant, the very name of her son is pregnant with meaning: Jesus, in Greek *Iesous*; *Yeshua*, in Jesus’ native Aramaic tongue; Joshua, in the Hebrew Bible. The name literally means “he who saves” or “he who delivers.” Just as this name was so appropriate for Joshua, Moses’ successor who through the conquest of opposing armies led the Israelites into the Promised Land, so now would this son of Mary take up the mantle of the name – for he too would lead his followers into the promised kingdom of God. But his conquest would not be of any foreign army; at least for Matthew and other early Christians, not any earthly army. Rather, his conquest would be over the power of sin, and with it death itself. There would be time and occasion enough in the apocalyptic future to conquer earthly armies with legions of angels (Matt. 26:53).

“He will save his people from their sins.” The trajectory of Jesus’ life is thus already mapped out retrospectively from resurrection to death to ministry to baptism to birth to God. All the Gospel writers and Christian evangelists need to do now is flip the narrative into a forward-moving story. The momentum necessary to carry the story from beginning to end has already been supplied by the conclusion of the narrative: death and resurrection. And now this driving power that will push the story forward to its

ultimate and necessary conclusion (for it has already happened) has been introduced into the birth narrative, before Jesus has even been born.<sup>12</sup>

For Matthew, one final proof text will complete the picture. And his Septuagint has given him just the text he needs, a passage that will address concerns about the potential scandal of Jesus' birth to Mary before she was married. The text that Matthew quotes in 1:23 comes from Isaiah 7:14. The Greek version of the passage that Matthew used reads as follows: "Behold, a *parthenos* is with child, and she will give birth to a son, and you will call his name Emmanuel." This is somewhat different from the Hebrew version that provides the basis for the English translations of Isaiah 7:14, which reads: "Behold, an '*almah*' is with child, and she will bear a son, and she shall name him Emmanuel."<sup>13</sup> I have intentionally not translated the pivotal Greek and Hebrew words here. It is safe to say that there is no small debate about how best to render both the Hebrew and the Greek translation of the Hebrew. Perhaps the best way to explain the situation is with an appeal to the notion of the semantic range of words. The semantic range, or word associations, with the Hebrew word '*almah*' consists of the terms "young woman (ripe sexually; maid or newly married)."<sup>14</sup> The primary meaning is the more generic "young woman," though it can also have a secondary meaning of "virgin." By contrast, the primary meaning of the Greek word *parthenos* is, in fact, "virgin" (hence the term "parthenogenesis" to describe organisms that can reproduce asexually).<sup>15</sup> The word can also have a secondary meaning of "young woman." Thus the Septuagint has translated the more general term in Hebrew ("young woman," '*almah*') with a slightly narrower meaning in Greek ("virgin," *parthenos*). This situation is made all the more complicated by the observation that there actually is a separate word in Hebrew whose primary, but not exclusive, meaning is "virgin" (*betulah*; Gen. 24:15; Exod. 22:16–17; Lev. 21:3, 14; Deut. 22:19, 23, 28; 32:25; Judg. 19:24, et al. – a

<sup>12</sup> See R. Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (New York: Paulist, 1972), and especially Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 140–142.

<sup>13</sup> The translation, and lack thereof, is mine. The NRSV renders '*almah*' as "young woman," while the more conservative NIV translates the word as "virgin," as does the Roman Catholic NAB version, conforming the translation to Matt. 1.

<sup>14</sup> This according to the standard Hebrew-English lexicon of biblical Hebrew, *BDB*, 761. For a full discussion of the terms and translation issues, see Davies and Allison, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, vol. 1: 214–217, and Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 143–153.

<sup>15</sup> The standard Greek-English lexicon of the early Christian writings translates *parthenos* as "one who has never engaged in sexual intercourse, virgin, chaste person" (*BDAG*, 777). The secondary meaning is a "female of marriageable age." As with '*almah*', the term *parthenos* has a semantic range that can include both the notion of virginity and a young unmarried woman.

total of fifty occurrences). Further, the term *‘almah* in Hebrew (which appears only nine times in the Hebrew Bible) is translated by the Septuagint not only as “virgin” (*parthenos*; Gen. 24:43 and Isa. 7:14) but more frequently as “girl” or “maiden” (*neanis*; Exod. 2:8, Ps. 68:25, Prov. 30:19, and Song of Solomon 1:3; 6:8).

Matthew is not afraid to adapt his story of Jesus to fit better with the prophetic proof texts he has discovered that echo Jesus’ ministry.<sup>16</sup> Our question in relation to the birth story is whether Matthew has again modified the story to have it fit a proof text he has found. If Matthew changed the story to make the triumphal entry fit the Zechariah 9:9 passage, has Matthew done this already in the case of Isaiah 7:14? In other words, which came first – the belief that Jesus was born of a virgin, for which Matthew found a proof text, or Matthew’s postresurrection discovery of the Isaiah 7:14 passage that was then applied to the less-than-optimal birth story of Jesus and from which the notion of the virgin birth arose? Given that the proof text serves a deeply theological purpose, my own inclination is to conclude that the story of the virgin birth was generated by the appropriation of the Isaiah 7:14 passage, and not the other way around.<sup>17</sup> The tradition of the virgin birth then led to a wholesale development of other traditions associated not only with the birth of Jesus, but with the story of the origins of Mary and how she came to be born.

This latter development can be seen especially in the second-century Christian text *The Protoevangelium of James*.<sup>18</sup> The *Protoevangelium* (or Proto-Gospel) relates the story of the miraculous conception of Mary to her barren parents, Joachim and Anna.<sup>19</sup> Just as God was responsible for Mary’s pregnancy with Jesus, so the “vessel” that brought Jesus into the world was herself born under divine circumstances. In this way the divine sonship of Jesus is insulated from human sin by the divine birth of Mary.

<sup>16</sup> Most famously, Matthew adapted the story of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Matt. 21) according to his understandable misunderstanding of Zechariah 9:9, given that Matthew was using the Septuagint (Greek) translation of the passage rather than the original Hebrew. This results in Matthew’s Jesus riding *two* animals (a donkey *and* a colt) into Jerusalem (21:7). See Davies and Allison, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, vol. 3: 118–121.

<sup>17</sup> So Davies and Allison, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, vol. 1: 214–217; see also Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 153.

<sup>18</sup> Sometimes this Gospel is called simply the Gospel of James, sometimes the Infancy Gospel of James. This Gospel was extremely popular among second-century Christians (and beyond). See R. Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1996).

<sup>19</sup> On the doctrine of the immaculate conception, see R. McBrien, *Catholicism: New Study Edition* (New York: HarperOne, 2013), 1078–1104.

Just as Jesus was destined from birth to save his people from their sins, retrospectively, so was Mary also destined from a sinless birth to be the mother of the one who would bring salvation to the world, again in retrospect. Just as Joseph in the Gospel of Matthew had received an angelic message regarding the birth of Jesus, so now an angelic message comes to the faithful Joachim that his barren wife Anna will indeed have a child (*Protoevangelium of James* 4.2). As an angel of the Lord had announced to Mary that she would bear the Son of the Most High (Luke 1:30–33), so now in the *Protoevangelium* does Anna receive an angelic revelation that she will give birth to a child who “shall be spoken of in the whole world” (4:1).<sup>20</sup>

Another possible explanation for the shift from scandalous birth to saving birth in Matthew could be less that Matthew is dealing with an undisputed and awkward tradition he has received about the circumstances of Jesus’ birth and more that Matthew is responding to charges that have arisen against Jesus and his followers by opponents of this new movement within Judaism, again especially in light of the claims made about the resurrection of Jesus. Matthew has no qualms about changing the story of Jesus precisely to respond to accusations against Jesus and his disciples. In Matthew’s version of the resurrection narrative he alone among the Gospel writers has the women coming to the tomb while it is still sealed (Matt. 28). Not only that, but Matthew has introduced guards at the tomb. Their job is to make sure that the followers of Jesus do not steal his body and make claims about his having been raised from the dead (27:63–67). But they cannot stop the angel from moving the stone for the risen Jesus. The purpose of the story is to answer charges that the disciples stole the body and that God did not actually raise the criminal Jesus, the crucified Jesus, from the dead. For Matthew, however, the addition of the story about the guards proves that the disciples could not have stolen the body. Further, when the women come to the tomb it is not to anoint the body of Jesus, as in Mark and Luke (Mark 16:1; Luke 24:1), for they know that the tomb is sealed (or at least the author Matthew knows it). They do not wonder about who will remove the stone, as Mark has it (16:3). Rather, they go simply “to see the tomb” (Matt. 28:1). And what a sight they see (Matt. 28:2–4):

And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it.

<sup>20</sup> The infancy narratives that we find in Matthew, Luke, and the *Protoevangelium of James* all fit patterns that the authors inherited from comparable stories of miraculous births from the Jewish scriptures. See the discussion in Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 346–355.

His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men.

Just as Matthew had introduced an apocalyptic earthquake at the death of Jesus (27:51), so now Matthew adds another earthquake to bear witness to another apocalyptic moment with the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. An angel of the Lord had appeared to Joseph in Matthew 1 with news of Mary's pregnancy by the Holy Spirit. Now an angel of the Lord comes to roll back the stone so that the women at the tomb may witness another act of God's Spirit with the resurrection of Jesus. But what of the guards? While Jesus has been raised from the dead, the guards "became like dead men" out of fear of the angelic figure (28:4).

But Matthew is not yet done with the guards, for they must relate what has happened. They themselves must become unwitting witnesses to the very resurrection of Jesus. For Matthew this proves that not only the women, but also the guards witnessed the empty tomb. But do they, like the centurion at the foot of the cross (27:54), come to believe that Jesus is the Son of God as a result? No. Instead, Matthew tells us:

Some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests everything that had happened. After the priests had assembled with the elders, they devised a plan to give a large sum of money to the soldiers, telling them, "You must say, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.' If this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story is still told among the Jews to this day. (Matt. 28:11–15)

Matthew has gone out of his way to answer the charge that the disciples had stolen the body and that Jesus had not really been raised from the dead. The posting of the guards proves otherwise, according to Matthew. The soldiers had been bribed – that is why they said nothing about their experience. Even though the addition of the guards seems rather clearly to be Matthew's somewhat flat attempt to bolster belief in the resurrection of Jesus, it also responds directly to accusations that were still current in the Jewish community with which Matthew was fighting about the messianic status of Jesus.

Does Matthew, in a similar vein, introduce scandal into the birth story of Jesus in order to deal with accusations in his day that Jesus had been born in sin? Does the shameful birth of Jesus arise from historical tradition, which Matthew cannot deny and must address? Or does this dishonorable birth story reflect what opponents of Jesus were saying in order to discredit him

and the claims that others made about him, quite apart from whether there were any grounds for the accusations? Matthew would also reasonably respond to these kinds of charges. In other words, was Matthew responding to another “story . . . still told among the Jews to this day”? If so, then what better way to refute such charges, such gossip, than to raise the accusation only to show such claims to be false? Matthew has found precedent in scripture for comparable false allegations against righteous women who were vindicated in the end. So also would Matthew vindicate Mary. The only difference in the case of Jesus is that the accusations against Mary were to discredit her son, whereas the sexual improprieties associated with Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and the wife of Uriah (Matt. 1) have to do with the women themselves, and not with their offspring. Joseph had wanted to divorce Mary quietly, but God sent an angel to bring Joseph his own little earthquake of revelation. The child was of the Holy Spirit. The child was to be named Jesus. The child was destined to save his people from their sins. For Matthew, such a child could not be the result of sin, but came from God. This child is holy and sinless, for how else could he grow up to save his people from their sins? This child is a royal child in the line of King David (Matt. 1:1–16), born at just the right time with just the right lineage (1:17). This child is born into the world as a new Moses, threatened by Herod the Great just as the birth of Moses had been threatened by Pharaoh in ancient Egypt (2:1–16). At first Jesus *appeared* to be born into scandal. But as Matthew tells it, the true story is the royal birth of the messiah in fulfillment of promises of old. The origins of Jesus may appear to be shrouded with a veil of scandal, but Matthew shows the appearance for what, in his view, it truly is: a thin fog evaporated in the bright sun of the virgin birth. In this way Matthew has become an omniscient narrator, letting the reader in on the real inside scoop.<sup>21</sup>

#### SANITIZING JESUS: THE BIRTH IN LUKE

If Matthew has told the birth story of Jesus arising out of scandal in order to demonstrate that Jesus instead comes from God, and so has wiped Jesus clean of the charges of being born in sin, the Gospel of Luke has sanitized the story even further. But in Luke’s case he has sanitized the story by ironically placing it in the filth and squalor of an animal stall. In stark contrast to Matthew’s version of things, where Joseph is the main character, in Luke it is Mary who is given clear pride of place. She, and not Joseph, receives the

<sup>21</sup> See J.F. McGrath, “Was Jesus Illegitimate? The Evidence of His Social Interactions,” *JSHJ* 5:1 (2007): 81–100.

angelic revelation that she will conceive a son who shall be named Jesus (Luke 1:30–33). Mary wonders at this since she has “not known a man” (the literal translation of Luke 1:34; both the NRSV and NIV render the phrase as “since I am a virgin”). Joseph does not enter the picture until 2:4–5 in the context of Joseph and Mary going from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea in order to be enrolled in the census ordered by the Emperor Augustus (2:1). The betrothal is mentioned in passing (2:5), as is her being with child. The rest of this famous story then unfolds. “And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn” (Luke 2:7). While Christian tradition has romanticized in various Christmas hymns this vision of sweet baby Jesus lying in a manger,<sup>22</sup> such tendencies certainly cut against the grain of the narrative as Luke has constructed it. Luke emphasizes the lowliness of Jesus’ birth, placing him in an animal stall, surrounded by shepherds. The humility of Jesus’ birth will serve as a springboard for the tremendous reversals he will bring about in his life, perhaps best epitomized by Mary’s Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55), which in turn finds restatement in the inaugural sermon of Jesus in Nazareth (Luke 4:16–30).<sup>23</sup> That Luke must be aware of the potential scandal is evident from his passing comment that Mary is only engaged to Joseph yet is already expecting a child (2:5). Luke conveys nothing of Joseph’s response to this unusual situation, nor does he comment on the potential problem of Mary’s pregnancy before marriage. Instead he glosses over such issues and moves directly to the significance of this birth as announced by an angel to shepherds: “I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people; to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord” (2:10–11). And then the story shifts immediately to an angelic choir praising God, followed by the shepherds glorifying and praising God (2:20), followed by still further songs of praise on the lips of Simeon (2:25–35) and the prophetess Anna (2:36–38). There are no problems in Luke’s account, only praise at the humble birth. No slaughter of the innocents under Herod. No fleeing to Egypt – just glory that will be recapitulated in the resurrection and appearances of Jesus in Luke 24.

<sup>22</sup> One need only recall “Away in a Manger,” a quiet and serene lullaby that emphasizes the loveliness of the scene: “Away in a manger, no crib for his bed, the little Lord Jesus laid down his sweet head . . . The cattle are lowing, the poor baby wakes. But little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes.”

<sup>23</sup> On this reversal motif in Luke, see J.O. York, *The Last Shall Be First: The Rhetoric of Reversal in Luke* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1991), as well as J.S. Siker, “‘First to the Gentiles’: A Literary Analysis of Luke 4:16–30,” *JBL* 111 (1992): 69–86.

But Luke's sanitized account of the birth story fits with his smoothing over difficulties elsewhere in his Gospel and Acts. Whether it is his rehabilitating the disciples so that they sleep "because of grief" in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:45), omitting that they fled, omitting Jesus' cry of abandonment from the cross (Luke 23), showing an idealized early church living in peaceable community and harmony (Acts 2:42–47), placing Peter and Paul in close agreement about their mission and goals (Acts 15), or having Mary submit to God with no voice from Joseph, in all of these ways and more Luke wants to tell a sacred story, a triumphant story. Luke draws a straight line from virgin birth to glorious resurrection, with a slight hiccup at the death of Jesus. Although, as we will see, Luke has Jesus befriending sinners, and so perhaps will be a sinner by association, Luke's Jesus ultimately brings about transformation that sees the inclusion of sinners within God's promised kingdom, from the woman who anoints Jesus (Luke 7) to the repentant criminal who dies on the cross next to him (Luke 23). If Matthew has addressed the problem with Jesus' birth directly, Luke has done so only indirectly.

#### LEGITIMATE ILLEGITIMACY

What was the problem with the birth of Jesus that both Matthew and Luke felt obliged to fix, each in their own way? They seem to agree that Jesus' birth was problematic because Mary and Joseph were not yet married when Mary became pregnant and gave birth. Thus the birth of Jesus was clearly an irregular birth. Further, when Jesus is called the "son of Mary" (Mark 6:3), it suggests that perhaps there was not widespread agreement about who fathered Jesus.<sup>24</sup> Since a man was normally referred to as the son of his father, even when the father was no longer living, calling Jesus the "son of Mary" could be construed as an insult – calling attention to a certain mystery about the identity of his father.<sup>25</sup> But the mystery could also be a way of alluding to divine origins, especially in light of the adoptionist overtones in the story of Jesus' baptism in Mark 1:9–11. Still, the charge that Jesus was in some sense an illegitimate child is left open both by Mary's unmarried status and by the reference to Jesus as the "son of Mary." The unmarried status of Mary is not mentioned in Mark's Gospel but is drawn from Matthew and

<sup>24</sup> See A.Y. Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 287–291, and J. Marcus, *Mark 1–8* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 373–380.

<sup>25</sup> J. Meier argues that the reference to Jesus as "son of Mary" was not necessarily an insult. See *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 1: 226–227. See also McGrath, "Was Jesus Illegitimate?," 87–91.



Luke's acknowledgment that Mary and Joseph were betrothed but not yet married. This kind of a harmonized reading across the Synoptic Gospels possibly explains the scandal associated not only with Jesus' birth but also with the people of Nazareth being offended, scandalized (Greek, *skandalizō*), by Jesus in Mark 6:3.

Some scholars have argued that the offense Jesus posed during his ministry is directly related to his irregular birth. The potential mystery about his father would open up Jesus to the charge that he was a *mamzer*, the child of a forbidden union under Jewish law. The term *mamzer* is a Hebrew word that is often translated as "bastard," referring typically to a child of incest or adultery. If one was not sure about the paternity of a child, then should one presume a legitimate Jewish father or, to play it safe, should one presume the possibility of some form of illicit sexual union that produced the child? In the latter case the child would be considered a *mamzer*. Penalties applied to a *mamzer* drew on Deuteronomy 23:3, which states: "No one born of a forbidden marriage [*mamzer*] nor any of his descendants may enter the assembly of the LORD, even down to the tenth generation." On this view, as a *mamzer* Jesus would not have been permitted into the Temple for worship and would have been excluded even from worship in the synagogue. Or so Bruce Chilton has argued at length.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, Chilton suggests that Jesus would have been considered a *mamzer* since he was born to Mary before she was officially married to Joseph. This would have led, according to Chilton, to a feeling within Jesus' young psyche of rejection by the Jewish people. But this kind of psychologizing of Jesus is completely speculative at best. In this case it is wrong-headed as well. There is no real evidence either that Jesus would have been treated as a *mamzer* or that he was rejected in the synagogue because of the circumstances of his birth. The notion that a *mamzer* belonged to what amounted to a "caste" (as Chilton argues) is very much overstated. Indeed, overall the rabbinic tradition sought to avoid assigning *mamzer* status to an individual. The *mamzer* rule was less about punishing the child and more about deterring adults from inappropriate sexual relations. "The Sages developed a series of rules and presumptions so that even when

<sup>26</sup> *Rabbi Jesus: An Intimate Biography* (New York: Doubleday, 2000). See also S. McKnight, "Calling Jesus Mamzer," *JSHJ* 1 (2003): 73–103. See the sharp critique of Chilton by C. Quarles, "Jesus as Mamzer," *BBR* 14:2 (2004): 243–255, as well as J. Klawans' highly critical review of Chilton's claims about Jesus as *mamzer*: "Review of *Rabbi Jesus*, by B. Chilton," *BR* (February 2002): 42. See also the cautions of McGrath, "Was Jesus Illegitimate?," 85–86, 99.

there is only a remote possibility that a person is not a *mamzer*, they could legitimate him and avoid the stigma of *mamzerut*.”<sup>27</sup>

A variant of the *mamzer* charge is that Jesus was considered illegitimate in the culture of his day and that awareness of his illegitimacy can be found in the very narratives that appear to tout his virgin birth or, more appropriately, the virginal conception.<sup>28</sup> This view has been championed by Jane Schaberg.<sup>29</sup> Schaberg goes so far as to argue that Mary was raped, so that the birth of Jesus was in fact the result of sexual violence. For Schaberg the subtext of the birth narrative not only points in this direction but has been silenced and revised to make it a more palatable story of divine birth. In the process, Schaberg argues, a deep theological truth was lost – namely, that God is graceful to Mary amid her disgrace and that God brings the messiah into the world even in the midst of such violence.<sup>30</sup> Although, like Chilton’s *mamzer* argument, Schaberg has not found much support for her arguments regarding the rape of Mary, she has raised significant questions about the traditions associated with the scandal of Jesus’ birth.<sup>31</sup>

Quite independently of Schaberg or Chilton, the father of Latino theology in the United States, Fr. Virgilio Elizondo, raised the specter of Jesus’ illegitimacy in a positive theological vein. Arguing for a vision of *mestizaje*, the mixing of cultures in which the *mestizo* no longer belongs to either originating culture, Elizondo suggests that coming from Galilee Jesus could well have been perceived by the Jerusalem elite as a half-breed, polluted by Greco-Roman culture and of suspect birth. Though Elizondo overstates his case historically, what I find of great interest is his desire to render something theologically positive from the very scandal that Matthew has sought to defuse. In this case, Elizondo is seeking to reconstruct a *mestizo* Jesus, a *borderland* Jesus akin to the U.S./Mexican borderland population, primarily poor Latino Catholics. His hope is that constructing Jesus in this way will show a God who identifies with the people and a people who can identify with this mixed Jesus who is not welcomed by the elite.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>27</sup> B. Schereschewsky, “Mamzer,” *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., vol. 13: 444.

<sup>28</sup> R. Brown had already commented that the language of “virginal conception” makes more sense than to talk about a “virgin birth,” because the primary question is whether Mary became pregnant as a result of intercourse with a man or whether her conception of Jesus occurred without sexual relations. See Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 122–164.

<sup>29</sup> Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus*. <sup>30</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>31</sup> For a helpful discussion of the politics of interpreting the infancy narratives, see F. Reilly, “Jane Schaberg, Raymond E. Brown, and the Problem of the Illegitimacy of Jesus,” *JFS* 21:1 (2005): 57–80.

<sup>32</sup> See V. Elizondo, *The Future Is Mestizo*, 6th ed. (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2000). See my critique of Elizondo’s difficulties in historicizing a *mestizo* Jesus: J. Siker,

Turning back to early Christian sources, the potential interpretations of Jesus as *mamzer* or as an illegitimate child, perhaps inherent to the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke themselves, developed in the second century into overt charges that Jesus was, in some manner, born in sin. Both the pagan philosopher Celsus and non-Christian Jewish traditions sought to discredit Jesus and the Christian movement by casting explicit aspersions onto his birth. The Christian writer Origen (c. 185–254 CE) responds to charges leveled by the late-second-century philosopher Celsus. In *The True Word* Celsus drew on Jewish sources for much of his attack on Christians. Origen quotes Celsus at length (the likely quotations from Celsus are in italics), saying:

He [Celsus] represents the Jew as having a conversation with Jesus himself and refuting him on many charges, as he thinks: first because *he fabricated the story of his birth from a virgin*; and he reproaches him because *he came from a Jewish village and from a poor country woman who earned her living by spinning*. He says that *she was driven out by her husband and while she was wandering about in a disgraceful way she secretly gave birth to Jesus*. And he says that *because he was poor he hired himself out as a workman in Egypt, and there tried his hand at certain magical powers on which the Egyptians pride themselves; he returned full of conceit because of these powers, and on account of them gave himself the title of God*.<sup>33</sup>

Celsus claims further that Mary was impregnated by a soldier named Panthera and that Mary was guilty of adultery. Origen responds, however, that “those who have blindly concocted these fables about the adultery of the Virgin with Panthera” have in fact invented these stories “to overturn His miraculous conception by the Holy Ghost.”<sup>34</sup>

A similar accusation that Mary gave birth to Jesus as a result of adultery appears evident in the Coptic Gospel of Thomas. In Thomas 104–105 we read the following: “They said [to Jesus]: ‘Come, let us pray today and let us fast.’ Jesus said, ‘Why? What sin have I committed or how have I been conquered? But after the bridegroom has left the bride chamber then let people fast and pray.’ Jesus said, ‘He who knows father and mother will be called the son of a harlot.’”<sup>35</sup> In its usual enigmatic style, the Coptic Gospel of Thomas is

“Historicizing a Racialized Jesus: Case Studies in the ‘Black Christ,’ the ‘Mestizo Christ,’ and White Critique,” *Biblical Interpretation* 15:1 (2007): 26–53.

<sup>33</sup> *Contra Celsum*, Book I, 28. From the edition and translation by H. Chadwick, *Origen: Contra Celsum* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 28.

<sup>34</sup> *Contra Celsum*, Book I, 32; see also Book I, 69. See similar charges and response in the late-second-century church writer Tertullian (*De Spectaculis*, 33.6).

<sup>35</sup> The translation is from Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, 146.

anything but immediately clear. Still, two things seem to emerge from these sayings: first, that Jesus has not committed any sin for which he should pray and fast (a form of penance); second, Thomas appears to be aware of a tradition that calls Jesus a “son of a harlot” (the Coptic literally reads “son of a *porne*”). This is simply another way of discrediting the birth of Jesus. Whether one focuses on the offspring of an adulterous relationship or on the mother as a harlot, in either case Jesus is accused of being an illegitimate bastard.

In addition to the charges mounted by Celsus, and repeated in the Coptic Gospel of Thomas, various Jewish texts make similar accusations. For example, the second-century rabbinic writings of the Tannaim also make reference to Jesus as the (likely illegitimate) son of a certain Panthera.<sup>36</sup> In the much later Babylonian Talmud (fifth century CE) we find similar charges leveled in *Shabbat* 104b. There, though Jesus is not mentioned by name, his mother Mary is criticized for wearing long hair in a suggestive manner, which led to adulterous behavior on her part with a man named Pandera. Jesus was the offspring of this adulterous relationship.<sup>37</sup> As Peter Schäfer notes, the congruence between the rabbinic traditions and Celsus make it likely that they both “draw on common sources . . . that relate that Jesus was a bastard because his mother was an adulteress (Miriam) and his father (Pandera/Panthera) was her lover.”<sup>38</sup> The situation for Jesus is made all the worse by the added Jewish charge that Pandera/Panthera is a Gentile. Whether or not these charges were widespread among pagan and Jewish opponents of early Christians, Christians were very sensitive to such accusations and were quick to defend the truth of the virginal conception of Jesus, and also the immaculate conception of Mary.

#### FROM INFANCY NARRATIVES TO THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

The Gospel of John has no birth narrative of Jesus comparable to Matthew and Luke. Instead, John has a much more highly developed theology that locates the origins of Jesus beyond all origins, as the cause of all beginnings: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (1:1). If the special relationship between Jesus and God began for

<sup>36</sup> See Tosefta, *Hullin* II, 2:22–23; Jerusalem Talmud tractates *Aboda Zara* 40d and *Sabbath* 14d. See further Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 534–537. See also P. Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 15–24. The second-century bishop Irenaeus reports that the Ebionites (a group of Christian Jews) deny the virgin birth of Jesus (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.1.3).

<sup>37</sup> Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud*, 18–19. <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

Mark with the baptism story, and for Matthew and Luke with the birth, then for John the father/son relationship between Jesus and God is eternally preexistent. Hence in later Christian tradition the Nicene Creed (325 CE) will make the claim that Jesus was “begotten, not made.”

Still, in John 8:41 the Fourth Gospel does preserve the only other passage in the New Testament writings that has overtones suggesting that Jesus was accused of being born in sin. The Jewish leaders say to Jesus: “We are not illegitimate children. We have one father, God himself.” Literally, this verse reads “We were not born as a result of sexual immorality [*ek porneias*].” I have highlighted the word “We” here because the original Greek makes this an emphatic “we,” setting themselves over against someone else who by implication *was* born in illegitimate circumstances.<sup>39</sup> The passage occurs in a larger context (John 8:31–59) where Jesus and Jewish leaders are engaged in intense debate over who is truly a child of Abraham and who does what Abraham did. Both Jesus and the Jewish leaders are accusing the other of not truly being children of Abraham, and thus not truly faithful children of God. The polemic between Jesus and the Jewish leaders at this point is extremely harsh.<sup>40</sup> The vitriolic language escalates with charge and countercharge. In 8:40–41 Jesus accuses the Jewish leaders of not acting as Abraham acted. Instead, Jesus charges, “You are indeed doing what your father did,” implying that they have a father different from that of Abraham and, by extension God. The Jewish leaders, in turn, meet Jesus’ challenge and they raise him a slur by insinuating that *they* know who their father is, namely, God himself. *They* were not born as the result of immoral sex, implying that Jesus *was* born in sin. Jesus then ups the ante one last time in John 8:44 with perhaps the most pernicious charge leveled against the Jews:

You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

<sup>39</sup> So C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 348; L. Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 408; R. Brown, *The Gospel According to St. John I–XII* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 357. R. Schnackenburg argues against the likelihood of this interpretation: *The Gospel According to St. John* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), vol 2: 212, as does McGrath, “Was Jesus Illegitimate?,” 91.

<sup>40</sup> See the discussion of this passage in J. Siker, *Disinheriting the Jews*, 132–142. See also Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John*, vol 2: 203–222; Brown, *The Gospel According to John I–XII*, 356–361; Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 341–342; and J.P. Sweeney, “Modern and Ancient Controversies over the Virgin Birth of Jesus,” *BS* 160 (2003): 142–158.

To drive the point home that he was *not* born in sin, Jesus then asks them point-blank, “Which of you convicts me of sin (*hamartia*)?” The implied answer is that none of them can convict Jesus of sin because he has been speaking the truth, unlike them.

The probability that John 8:41 represents an implicit charge that Jesus was born in sin is made stronger by the story of the man born blind in John 9. In this story Jesus causes a scandal by healing the man on the Sabbath (9:14). But after performing the healing Jesus is offstage for the bulk of the story. The now-healed man born blind bears witness to his neighbors and then to the Pharisees that “the man called Jesus” healed him. The Pharisees are divided about Jesus, for on the one hand how can a sinner do such amazing deeds? But on the other hand, how can a righteous person violate the Sabbath law (9:16)? The healed man declares that Jesus is a prophet (9:17). After asking the man’s parents what they know, and then interviewing the man again, the Pharisees finally come to a conclusion: “Give glory to God. We know that this man is a sinner [*hamartōlos*]” (9:24). The healed man, however, refuses to agree with their judgment. The Jewish leaders conclude by invoking condemnation not only on the absent Jesus, but now on the healed man. The charge resonates strongly with what we saw in 8:41, and in the context of John 9 their charge can be read as guilt by association. Jesus is guilty of sin because he violates the Sabbath law, even if it is to heal a man born blind. The healed man is guilty because he defends a Sabbath-breaking Jesus. Just as the Jewish leaders had invoked an implied accusation that Jesus was born in sin in 8:41, so now in 9:34 they explicitly bring the charge to bear against the man born blind: “You were born entirely in sins [*en hamartiais*], and are you trying to teach us? And they drove him out.”

Of course, the reader of John’s Gospel knows the rest of the story. They also know the beginning of the story – “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). Thus the reader is not surprised when at the end of John 9 the man born blind once again meets Jesus, and Jesus asks him if he believes in the Son of Man (9:35). Jesus then reveals himself as the Son of Man, and the healed man responds in faith, “Lord, I believe.’ And he worshipped him” (9:38). But now the issue of sin reenters the picture, and in response to Jesus’ statement that he has come into the world for judgment, the embattled Pharisees comment (9:40), “Surely we are not blind, are we?” Jesus’ telling reply now becomes the definitive response that caps the entire story. The Pharisees had cast out the man born blind as one born in utter sin. But now Jesus has the last word (9:41): “Jesus said to them, ‘If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.’” The Gospel of John redeems

the healed man and convicts the Pharisees of sin, for as children of the devil, how could it be otherwise? The parentage of Jesus also becomes the patronage of Jesus in John's Gospel. God is his father. Jesus was not born in sin, but was preexistent. He has become incarnate in human flesh, but he could never be genuinely charged with sin. Even to make the accusation showed that the accuser was the sinner, not Jesus. Once again, then, we see that linking Jesus to a sinful birth generated a very strong reaction from the early Christians.<sup>41</sup>

#### DIVINE CHILD: THE INFANCY GOSPEL OF THOMAS

This reaction came not only in the form of denials that Jesus was born in sin (John) or in the form of explanations for his unusual birth (Matthew and Luke). The response of early Christians also took the form of speculation about what kind of a child Jesus must have been, since he was God incarnate. What would a divine child say and do? We already get hints of this in the Gospel of Luke, where Luke recounts not only the wondrous responses of Simeon and Anna on beholding the infant Jesus (Luke 2:25–40), but also the only New Testament story about Jesus as a youth – his visit to the Temple at the age of twelve, where he astonished not only his parents by not keeping up with the family when they left town, but also the teachers in the Temple who were amazed at his learning (Luke 2:41–52).

This same story is found in another early Christian writing, one that most likely dates to the late second century, the so-called *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*.<sup>42</sup> Although not as widely circulated or likely as popular as the *Protoevangelium of James*, the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* relates stories about Jesus as a child from ages five to twelve. Ancient biographies tended not to describe changes and development in the personalities of their subjects from childhood through adulthood; rather, they described the fixed character of a

<sup>41</sup> The apocryphal *Acts of Pilate* includes an explicit accusation by Jewish leaders during the trial of Jesus before Pilate that Jesus was “born of fornication” (2:3). This charge is countered by a smaller group of “pious Jews”: “We do not say that he came of fornication, for we know that Joseph was betrothed to Mary, and he was not born of fornication.’ Pilate then said to the Jews who said that he came of fornication, ‘Your statement is not true; for there had been a betrothal, as your compatriots say” (2:4; Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, 172). The debate over whether Jesus was born of fornication continues in the *Acts of Pilate* 2:5. The date of the *Acts of Pilate* is difficult to determine (late second to fourth century), but it appears to represent somewhat later Christian tradition. See Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, 164–166.

<sup>42</sup> The story may be found in the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, 19:1–13, the last narrative in the book. For a discussion about the critical issues related to the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, see Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas*, 84–101, and S. Davis, *Christ Child: Cultural Memories of a Young Jesus* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 3–44.

person that was evident from birth onward. Hence nature, not nurture, was key. Stories about birth and childhood were viewed as anticipating the character of the individual for which they became famous as an adult.<sup>43</sup> Thus the divine power of Jesus manifest in the Gospel accounts is read back into imagined stories from his youth. As many modern readers have noted, the Jesus that comes across in *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* is a difficult and dangerous child at best. But the stories narrated about the child Jesus were told to emphasize his connection to God from day one, so that the believer could trust that his or her faith in the divine Jesus was trust in a powerful figure from birth through childhood to adult ministry.<sup>44</sup>

One would think that the seemingly petulant little child of the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* would be linked in some way to sin. A good summary statement of the actions of the child Jesus can be found on the lips of a man whose son was killed by Jesus when the boy ran past Jesus and bumped his shoulder (4:4). “The parents of the dead boy came to Joseph and blamed him, saying, ‘Because you have such a boy, you can’t live with us in the village, or else teach him to bless and not curse. He’s killing our children!’” Later on a frustrated Joseph says to Mary (14:5), “Don’t let him go outside, because those who annoy him end up dead.” But the whole point is that whatever the child Jesus does is right, because he is divine. He is capable of terrible deeds, but by definition none of them is sinful. The terms for sin do not even appear in the narrative. Jesus is simply divine. He deals harshly with those who would presume to teach him (including Joseph), and he deals graciously with those who recognize his divine power.

This kind of a document is the logical extension of the birth narratives found in Matthew and Luke. If Jesus is from God, then the controversial manner in which he came into the world (so Matthew) is quite beside the point. What matters is the veneration of this glorious child, from birth to resurrection. Curiously, whereas both Matthew and Luke give nods that anticipate the death of Jesus, the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* has none of it. The only suffering is that which the child Jesus inflicts on others. He is

<sup>43</sup> See Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas*, 96, and T. Wiedemann, *Adults and Children in the Roman Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 49–50.

<sup>44</sup> For traditions about the child Jesus as they continued to develop in the medieval period, see especially M. Dzon and T.M. Kenney, eds., *The Christ Child in Medieval Culture: Alpha es et O!* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012). Particularly noteworthy in relation to the current study are the traditions that linked the manger of Jesus with a sacrificial altar (pp. 3–114), and issues around the development of the child Jesus. See, in the same volume, W. MacLehose, “The Holy Tooth: Dentition, Childhood Development, and the Cult of the Christ Child,” which explores the medieval debate over relics and whether the resurrected Jesus could have left a tooth behind (the Holy Tooth of Soissons, pp. 201–223).



incapable of suffering. Nor is he particularly empathetic. Rather, he demonstrates sheer and brute power over whatever he wills. The only scandal, from the perspective of the child Jesus and presumably the narrator of the stories, is when people fail to realize with whom they are dealing, the incarnation of God himself. The *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* is so far removed from any reflection on a birth or childhood of Jesus involving shame that it reflects a kind of ultimate divinizing of Jesus. As the child Jesus himself declares to the astonished crowd around him (6:10): “Are you really so amazed? Rather, consider what I’ve said to you. The truth is that I also know when you were born, and your parents, and I announce this paradox to you: when the world was created, I existed along with the one who sent me to you.”

#### OBEDIENCE AND THE SINLESS CHILD

The one clearly parallel story between the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* and the New Testament Gospel tradition is the narrative about Jesus as a boy of twelve going to the Temple in Jerusalem (Luke 2:41–52; *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, 19:1–13). This passage raises some curious issues. Of special interest for our purposes is the frustrated question that Mary poses to Jesus when they finally find him sitting among the teachers in the Temple after three days of anxious searching (Luke 2:46; *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* 19:4). From the perspective of Mary’s relieved scolding Jesus appears to have been innocently disobedient to his parents. After all, he says, did they not know that he would be in his Father’s house? Jesus then gets up and goes with his parents for the return trip to Nazareth, and he “was obedient [*hypotassō*] to them” (Luke 2:51). The *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* similarly states that Jesus was “obedient to his parents” (19:11). But the question in relation to this divine child Jesus in the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* is not whether he is obedient to his parents but whether his parents and would-be teachers recognize him as the true master and Lord. His childhood appears to be a mere inconvenience to get through so that as an adult he may be seen for the incarnate presence of God that he is. The story in Luke reads somewhat differently, as a more humble child Jesus seems surprised at his parents’ concern, without the previous stories of the dangerously divine child Jesus from *Thomas*.

The issue of obedience, however, raises another significant question regarding the notion of the sinlessness of Jesus. What would it have meant, for example, for Jesus to be a sinless eight- or ten-year-old? Or would such categories simply not apply because he had not yet attained the age of adulthood within Jewish law? Did Mary ever have to remind him twice

about doing his chores? Did he ever take a short-cut across a field that he knew had just been planted? Did he ever retaliate against another child who had cheated at a game? In other words, did the child Jesus ever do anything wrong?? Did he ever get caught with his hand in the proverbial cookie jar during the celebration of Purim and simply deny that he was taking another hamantash?

While there is certainly no evidence that Jesus was a particularly disobedient child, it is nonetheless striking that the charge against the adult Jesus that he is a “glutton and a drunkard” (Matt. 11:19; Luke 7:34) echoes the classic text from the Jewish scriptures about disobedient children, Deuteronomy 21:18–21. The passage reads:

If someone has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father and mother, who does not heed them when they discipline him, then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his town at the gate of that place. They shall say to the elders of his town, “This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a glutton and a drunkard.” Then all the men of the town shall stone him to death. So you shall purge the evil from your midst; and all Israel will hear, and be afraid.<sup>45</sup>

The rabbis understood this passage to refer to a son under the age of adulthood (typically thirteen). The rabbis were also extremely uncomfortable with the notion that a child should be put to death even for being a “glutton and a drunkard” and for violating the command to honor father and mother. Thus the rabbis found a way to interpret around the injunction that such a child merited capital punishment.<sup>46</sup> And yet the charge against Jesus appears to function as further ammunition to justify putting him to death as a rebellious challenger of authority leading the people astray. Thus not only did the early Christians retroject on Jesus’ birth their conviction that he was the divine Son of God, but so did the opponents of Jesus’

<sup>45</sup> Although the Septuagint version of the phrase “glutton and drunkard” (*symbolokopon oinophlygei*) is not particularly close to the text in Matthew or Luke (*phagos kai oinopotes*), the notion of “glutton and drunkard” would have called to mind an echo of the Deut. 21 passage.

<sup>46</sup> In the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin, chapter 8 (71a), the rabbis argue that there never really has been a rebellious son worthy of death, because it would require two parents “fit” for each other (with the same voice, and – by extension – the same size and appearance); and because there never have been identical twin parents of a son, there has also never truly been a rebellious son punishable by death. So why was this law written? According to R. Judah and R. Simeon, this law was written “that you may study it and receive reward.” Namely, some laws are written not to be implemented but for study and edification.

followers retroject on Jesus their own conviction that he was actually a deceiver and one who shamefully violated the traditions of Israel, from Sabbath observance to being born in sin.

And so, to ask again, did the child Jesus ever do anything wrong?<sup>47</sup> The question, of course, is absurd. It is absurd because the notion of a sinless human being can be shelved right next to the idea of a virgin birth or the resurrection from the dead or any other miracle one chooses – it is not subject to reasoned investigation. If we know anything about what it means to be human, we know the truth of Paul's claim in Romans 3 that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. And yet Paul can also affirm that God made "him [Jesus] who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21; NIV). Paul, of course, is reflecting here not on the birth or childhood of Jesus but on the meaning of his death and resurrection. Still, what does it mean to talk about Jesus as sinless in every instance of his life, in every interaction, in every relationship he had, from birth to death? The answer is always going to be either a response of faith or a whole other set of questions, or perhaps both. Can one learn and grow without making mistakes, without erring? When do mistakes cross the line into wrong-doing, to sin? What counts as sin for an eight- or ten-year-old boy in first-century Palestine? For that matter, what counts as sin for a fourteen-year-old Jesus whose bar mitzvah is still within recent memory? Is sin intentionally doing something that one knows is wrong? Is it the act alone that constitutes sin, or does the volitional thought that led to the act constitute sin, as Jesus suggests in the antitheses from Matthew's Sermon on the Mount (5:21–48)? When the teenage Jesus went to Jerusalem with his family to observe Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, did he as a faithful Jew fast and confess his sins and join in the ritual ceremonies marking the day? Or, to put it crassly, did he tell his mother that he did not need to participate in Yom Kippur because he had not sinned, ever?

But again, these questions demonstrate a failure to understand that the entire idea of the sinlessness of Jesus is but a metaphor, a bag of seeds that have been sown across the life and death of Jesus in view of the conviction that God raised him from the dead. And these seeds have grown into large shrubs

<sup>47</sup> In 1926, the surrealist artist Max Ernst painted a startling image of Mary spanking the baby Jesus, "The Virgin Chastising the Christ Child Before Three Witnesses: Andre Breton, Paul Eluard, and the Painter." As C.W. Bynum remarks about this painting, referring to popular conceptions about Jesus and his mother, "If Jesus needs spanking or if Mary spans unjustly, something is badly wrong between the supposedly sinless mother and her supposedly sinless son." "The Body of Christ in the Later Middle Ages: A Reply to Leo Steinberg," *RQ* 39:3 (Autumn 1986): 399–439 (400). See the painting on this book's cover.

that house miraculous birth narratives, stories of a seemingly sinful woman giving birth to a sinless son, a son whose own story has grown up through the clouds into the heavens and back again. The very idea of sinlessness can lead to a desire that itself yields to a portrait such as the one displayed in the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* of a child God who from our perspective is self-righteous and in his dealings with others sins in ways that are as grotesquely miraculous as the faith they betray. We shall have much more to say about the metaphor of sinless perfection in the chapters that follow. For now it is enough to register what I will be arguing toward the close of the book, that the idea of the sinlessness of Jesus serves as a metaphor and not as an ontological statement about the divine state of Jesus' soul when he was two months, four years, or fifteen years old. We will attend to the ossification and ontologizing of this metaphor in the final chapter.

#### HISTORICAL SIN AND THE VIRGIN BIRTH

We have moved, then, from clear concerns about the scandal of Jesus' birth reflected in Matthew, less present in Luke, but evident in the Gospel of John, to second- and third-century traditions where accusations are made by opponents of Christianity that Jesus was born in sin, accusations that are defused by Christian authors as Christians increasingly meditate with wonder and awe at the divine origins of Jesus. If Jesus was raised by God from the dead, then Jesus must have had special origins, divine origins. We have seen something of how the tradition of the virginal conception of Jesus may have developed, and how the divine birth of Jesus played out in the Gospels and beyond. We have also seen some of the debates among scholars who themselves have sought to recover some positive theological value from the scandal associated with the birth of Jesus. So where does this leave us? In the last section of this chapter I explore the interplay between history and theology in regard to the controversial stories associated with the birth of Jesus.

As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, perhaps the most important observation about the birth stories of Jesus is the counterintuitive realization that although they occur at the beginning of the narrative about Jesus, in fact they were likely the last part of the Jesus story to be formed in the history of the composition of the Gospels. They were written with a postresurrection conviction that: (1) in light of his divine destiny Jesus must have had divine origins and (2) his origins must be in line with his subsequent ministry, death, and resurrection. This theological retrojection completely informs the historical memory and the historical narratives that resulted. Thus, the birth stories of Jesus constitute theological claims writ large into purportedly historical

narratives. As we have seen, however, the theological claims, and the historical narratives they invoke, run in two fundamental directions. The primary Gospel narratives represent Christian faith convictions about the birth of God into the world to bring about human salvation. But the secondary and initially implied narratives represent Jewish and pagan convictions that Jesus was born not from God but from fornication and scandal – a scandal that had a parallel end in his death by crucifixion. Christians responded strongly against this version of the story and managed to turn vicious stories about Jesus into virtuous stories about Jesus, his mother Mary, and his father, God. Neither version of the story, of course, has any basis for making historical claims apart from theological convictions. Historians have no categories for conducting credible investigations into such matters, let alone making historical claims that fit the purview of the historian. Christian theologians, meanwhile, have been very busy over the centuries building additions to the narrative framework of the birth stories, adding their own varnishes to the stories they have received, often accompanied with gilded frames, but sometimes trying to recover a supposed unvarnished original lying beneath the surface of the texts. Such an original, however, does not really exist beyond the faith convictions of those who first wrote them (and the faith convictions of moderns retrojecting their own concerns).

It is the case, of course, that Jesus really and truly was “born of a woman” (Gal. 4:4), as Paul so simply put it. But one’s depiction of the birth narrative says a great deal about one’s larger theological worldview. One can ground in these stories a theological vision rooted in the glory of God, replete with heavenly choirs of angels and modern-day annual Christmas pageants paying homage to the miraculous birth story. This is certainly the popular vision of things, as any living manger scene outside a church during the season of Advent testifies. This *Christ* is born into glowing swaddling clothes with a crib-warmer and a dangling shiny mobile filled with the very names of God, accompanied by gold, frankincense, and myrrh. A glorious Christ indeed. But one can also ground in these stories a theological vision rooted in the tragic condition of humanity’s inhumanity to the poorest and weakest among us, in this case represented by a pregnant unmarried teenage girl, however that came to pass. This *Jesus* is born into a harsh world where there is no room in the inn, but only a stinking and filthy animal stall, into a Palestine occupied by the oppression of Roman power. This is a scandalous Jesus.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>48</sup> See especially Horsley, *The Liberation of Christmas*, as well as Spong, *Born of a Woman*.

And so in the birth of *Jesus the Christ* we find a certain dualism that has perplexed Christian theology since its inception. This tension/paradox/dualism is, in my view, incapable of resolution in any real sense, for to hold on to one side of the equation (the human Jesus) means by definition to raise questions about the other side (the divine Christ). And talk of the “divine Jesus” or the “human Christ” is really primarily an exercise in semantics.<sup>49</sup> Nor is a resolution of this tension/paradox/ dualism particularly necessary or even desirable, especially from the perspective of Christian faith. It is no accident that within the Christian tradition the primary language used to describe the calculus of how the unchanging eternal God can become incarnate in a changing temporal human being can be summed up in one word: mystery. This may not be a compelling solution, but it certainly is a time-honored one for explaining human faith and human experiences that ultimately fall short of language and logic. The Apostle Paul, for example, felt quite comfortable appealing to mystery just after explaining why it was that the Jews, for the most part, rejected the gospel message addressed to them, while the Gentiles, for whom the message was not originally intended, have responded in faith (Rom. 11:25–36). Christian theologians over the centuries have continued to reflect on the unfolding mysteries of the faith, sometimes very fruitfully and sometimes very painfully.

This attempt to hold together a unified *Jesus Christ* and not a bifurcated split personality has been represented over the centuries in Christological debates over where one locates Jesus the Christ on the sliding scale between the divine and the human, the creator and the creature, God and people. Theologians use the language of “high” Christology and “low” Christology to describe this continuum. The more closely one identifies Jesus with God as a divine figure, the higher the Christology (there are notions of being closer to the heavens in this image); the more closely one identifies Jesus with humanity, the lower the Christology (i.e., Jesus is firmly grounded in this earthly world). Some theologians have suggested that if Jesus was fully human, then surely he must have experienced something of the anguish and guilt that results from human sinfulness. But to make this suggestion is at the same time to say that Jesus was not perfect, and if Jesus was not perfect, then how could he be God? Similarly, some theologians have suggested that if Jesus was fully divine, then as a human being he could surely experience something of the human temptation to sin, but in actuality he could not sin because he was divine (so Heb. 4:15). If Jesus could or did

<sup>49</sup> See, e.g., C. Evans, *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith: The Incarnational Narrative as History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

not fully experience the consequences of human sin from within his own self, then how could he be fully human? In the end the divine typically wins out over the human. Consider the stakes. If one sacrifices the humanity of Jesus to his divine nature, then one can claim that Jesus represents the ideal obedient human being, the new Adam, who as the sinless one shows us how human existence should look. While one loses something of the close identification of Jesus with humanity, one gains eternal access to God – a small price to pay for holding Jesus’ perfect divinity intact, or so it would seem. If, however, one sacrifices the divinity of Jesus to his human nature, a high Christology for a very low, perhaps subterranean, Christology, then is humanity much better off than before? Can the human Jesus effect any true change in the earthly realm? And so the mystery of the two natures of Christ has stood firm within Christian tradition, for if either side collapses, then the entire enterprise folds. For Christians to let go of the humanity of Jesus allows him to float into the stratosphere of docetic and Gnostic Christologies, where Jesus appears to be flesh and blood but in fact is not. And for Christians to let go of the divinity of Jesus allows him to sink into the morass of humanity along with the rest of us, leaving him without a heavenly ladder with which to connect the human realm to the divine realm, without a mechanism to show his followers a true pathway to the divine. At least this approach has been the classic understanding of Jesus, always tethered between heaven and earth.

The birth narrative of Jesus figures directly into this ongoing Christological discussion and debate. While it is crucial in Christian tradition that Jesus be born into this world in true flesh and blood, a real human being (which even the Gospel of John emphasizes – “and the Word became flesh,” 1:14), for the early Christian tradition it was also crucial to show that this earthly birth actually had heavenly origins. The story of the virgin birth gave Christians a foothold in both the earthly and heavenly realms. It corresponded directly to the doctrine of the resurrection of Jesus, a bodily yet spiritual resurrection (1 Cor. 15). Although early Christians had to refute charges from without that Jesus was somehow born in sin, and so human to a literal fault, fairly quickly the problem shifted to internal divisions within Christian tradition as some believers sought to preserve the radical divinity of Jesus at the expense of his true flesh-and-blood humanity (see 1 and 2 John). If initially Christians had to deal with charges that Jesus came across as all too human – complete with a shameful birth and a parallel shameful death – fairly soon these polarities were reversed in corrective narratives of the virgin birth and the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. What were Christians to do with the Christological pendulum swinging too far in the

direction of the radical divinity of Jesus, and a consequent high Christology that threatened to glorify Jesus right out of real human existence? Could there be a Christology that was too high, too glorious?

Ultimately, then, the Christian tradition has sought on the one hand to emphasize the real flesh and blood humanity of Jesus in the birth story, while on the other hand this same tradition has been engaged in what amounts to a campaign to utterly dehumanize Jesus so that he can truly be the divine child of Christian faith. Thus the Christ child does not cry. His birth causes his mother Mary no labor pains.<sup>50</sup> He eats but does not have bowel movements.<sup>51</sup> As the incarnate Word of God at birth he is omniscient and omnipotent, for he is fully God. This kind of divinizing of Jesus results precisely in his dehumanization. The burden of bearing a dual identity of divine and human even at birth weighs heavily on the infant Jesus and on Christian tradition. Perhaps Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, put the dualism best in one of his many Christmas sermons:

So let us proclaim the good news of *the day from day, his salvation*; let us proclaim *among the nations his glory, among all the peoples his wonders* (Ps. 96:2–3). He lies in a manger, but he holds the whole world in his hands; he sucks his mother's breasts, but feeds the angels; he is swaddled in rags, but clothes us in immortality; he is suckled, but also worshiped; he could find no room in the inn, but makes a temple for himself in the hearts of believers. It was in order, you see, that weakness might become strong,

<sup>50</sup> Early on in Christian tradition the belief developed that Mary remained a virgin before, during, and after the birth of Jesus. Since her womb miraculously passed Jesus into this world without breaking her hymen, she experienced no pain. In this way she reversed the time-honored curse imposed in Gen. 3:15 (but see also Rev. 12:2, which seems to suggest a continuation of labor pains). The tradition goes on to make significant comparisons between Eve and Mary. Whereas Eve brought sin and death into the world through her disobedience, so Mary has brought forgiveness and life into the world through her willingness to be the handmaiden of the Lord. See J. Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 39–54. See also Thomas Aquinas, who considers the question of whether or not Mary experienced pain in childbirth: “*I answer that*, The pains of childbirth are caused by the infant opening the passage from the womb. Now it has been said above [Q28.A2] that Christ came forth from the closed womb of His Mother, and, consequently, without opening the passage. Consequently there was no pain in that birth, as neither was there any corruption” (*Summa Theologica*, III, Q35.A6).

<sup>51</sup> In the late second and early third centuries CE, Clement of Alexandria developed a quasi-docetic view of Jesus' physical body. He seems to have agreed with the Gnostic Valentinus, whom he quotes as stating that “Jesus . . . ate and drank in a way specific to himself without excreting his food. His power of self-control was so great that the food was not corrupted within him, since he was not a subject of corruption” (*Stromateis* 3.59.3). See P. Ashwin-Siejkowski, *Clement of Alexandria on Trial* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 95–97.



that strength became weak. Let us therefore rather wonder at than make light of his birth in the flesh, and there recognize the lowliness on our behalf of such loftiness. From there let us kindle charity in ourselves, in order to attain to his eternity.”<sup>52</sup>

By comparing and contrasting the utterly human with the supremely divine in the infant Jesus it seems clear that Augustine views the very human circumstances of Jesus’ birth as direct windows onto the world of God. In the infant Jesus one sees a manger, a suckling child, swaddled in rags, with no room in the inn. But these surface realities are but a springboard for far loftier truths: the infant Jesus holds the entire world in his hands, feeds the angels, clothes the faithful in immortality, is the object of worship, and fashions a temple for himself in the hearts of believers. The infant Jesus needs much on the surface, but in truth this divine infant gives everything and so leads the faithful to eternity. Low Christology has given way to High Christology, which even spreads its wings over Jesus’ mother Mary. As Augustine’s teacher Ambrose claimed, because Mary was a virgin “no taint of sin penetrated, where no intercourse occurred.”<sup>53</sup> The very sinlessness of Jesus now gets retrojected onto his mother Mary. Spotless and pure, ever unchanging.

Whereas Augustine emphasized the perpetual virginity of Mary – before, during, and after giving birth to Jesus – the late-second/early-third-century theologian Tertullian (c. 160–220 CE) held a different view of Jesus’ birth that perhaps better holds together the duality of the birth narrative, reflecting a Christology that emphasizes both the radical divinity and humanity of Jesus at the same time. While Augustine subordinated the humanity of Jesus to his divine origins and destiny, Tertullian seems quite pleased to have Christians wallow in the utter humanity of Jesus’ birth. In his treatise *On the Flesh of Christ* (*De Carne Christi*) Tertullian combats the arch-heretic Marcion, who held that Christ was the pure Spirit of God and only appeared to be in the flesh. For Marcion “it is unbecoming for God to concern God’s

<sup>52</sup> Sermon 190. See T.C. Lawlor, ed. and trans., *St. Augustine: Sermons for Christmas and Epiphany* (London: Newman Press, 1952), 105–106. See also Sermon 189, where Augustine states: “The birth of Christ from the Father was without mother; the birth of Christ from his mother was without father; each birth was wonderful. The first was eternal, the second took place in time.” *Saint Augustine – Essential Sermons*, ed. D. Doyle, trans. E. Hill (New York: New City Press, 2007), Sermon 189.4, p. 250. In his *Confessions* Augustine states that when he was a Manichean he thought Jesus was born only of the spirit, not of the contaminated defiled flesh (5.10.20).

<sup>53</sup> Ambrose, Sermon 22:30. “On the Feast of the Nativity.” *NPNF*, vol. 10.

self with the flesh.”<sup>54</sup> But Tertullian counters that Christ came into the world precisely in the indignity and dishonor of human flesh. God became human so that humans might become redeemed children of God. Tertullian glories in the sheer humanity of Jesus: “I mean this flesh suffused with blood, built up with bones, interwoven with nerves, entwined with veins, a flesh which knew how to be born, and how to die, human without doubt, as born of a human being.”<sup>55</sup> Jesus floats in the “sewer” of the womb, is born amid pain and slime and blood, suffers his first wound when the umbilical cord is cut, fusses at his mother’s breast, and in general endures all of the grime and dirt associated with birth and newborns.<sup>56</sup>

At least as significant as Tertullian’s emphasis on the bloody details of the birth of Jesus, in contrast to Augustine, is Tertullian’s strong conviction that Mary was not a perpetual virgin, but that – again in contrast to Augustine – Mary gave birth to Jesus not as a virgin, but as a wife. She conceived as a virgin, but she gave birth as any woman. Jesus indeed ruptures Mary’s body and “de-virginizes” her.<sup>57</sup> As Tertullian states, Christ was born “not of a virgin but of a woman” (*non ex uirgine, sed ex muliere*; *On the Flesh of Christ*, 23.5). Far from Marcion’s Christ, who “never made a mess on his mother’s lap or nibbled at her nipples, never wasted time on infancy, boyhood or adolescence,” Tertullian envisioned a Jesus who really lived a fully human life, with the filth and shame of birth, life, and death in the mix.<sup>58</sup> But even with this strong emphasis on the very real humanity of Jesus, especially in his birth, Tertullian can also say of Jesus, “For in putting on our flesh, He made it His own; in making it His own, He made it sinless” (*On the Flesh of Christ*, 16). Thus, although in terms of the birth of Jesus we see Tertullian leaning in the direction of a genuinely flesh-and-blood Jesus, he also manages to keep Christ firmly grounded, as it were, in the High Christology of a divine sinless identity.

So what is at stake in the sinless virgin birth of Jesus? According to some theologians virtually everything in the Christian faith stands or falls on the

<sup>54</sup> C. Radler, “The Dirty Physician: Necessary Dishonor and Fleshly Solidarity in Tertullian’s Writings,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 63 (2009): 1–24 (13).

<sup>55</sup> *On the Flesh of Christ*, 5.1 (*The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3).

<sup>56</sup> See Radler, “The Dirty Physician,” 17.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 19. See also W. Otten, “Christ’s Birth of a Virgin Who Became a Wife: Flesh and Speech in Tertullian’s *De Carne Christi*,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 51 (1997): 247–260, and G. Dunn, “Mary’s Virginité *In Partu* and Tertullian’s Anti-Docetism in *De Carne Christi* Reconsidered,” *JTS* 58 (2007): 467–484.

<sup>58</sup> E. Osborne, *Tertullian, First Theologian of the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 112. See Radler, “The Dirty Physician,” 120. See also H. van Campenhausen, *The Virgin Birth in the Theology of the Ancient Church* (London: SCM Press, 1964).

truth (historic and otherwise) of the virgin birth. Early in the twentieth century J. Gresham Machen, a prominent professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, broke with the seminary and with the Presbyterian denomination over liberal developments that included backing away from the need to affirm the virgin birth of Christ. He responded with a major work, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, first published in 1930. For Machen the issue revolved partly around the simple authority of the Bible. If the Bible stated something, it was either true or not. If the virgin birth was not true, then how could anyone rightly trust what else the Bible had to say? For Machen, “a man cannot reject the testimony of the New Testament at this point without serious peril to his soul.”<sup>59</sup>

On the opposite side of the theological spectrum one also finds advocates who just as vociferously view clinging to the notion of the virgin birth as nothing short of betraying the very faith of a Christianity that needs to mature and grow. For though the doctrine of the virginal conception has certainly elevated Mary to a divine or semi-divine status, especially in the Roman Catholic tradition, it has also served to present an impossible vision for women, as crafted by a male church. One need look no further than Pope John Paul II’s 1988 encyclical *Mulieris Dignitatem* (On the Dignity and Vocation of Women), in which Mary functions as the ultimate role model: virgin, mother, spouse (and preferably all three at once!). In her controversial book, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus*, Jane Schaberg argued that the doctrine of the virginal conception is a distortion and a mask behind which can be found a tradition regarding the illegitimacy of Jesus. “Unmasked, that tradition presents us with fuller human realities and therefore with deeper theological potential,” especially freeing women and men in the church not to have to continue repressing the feminine dimension of the divine.<sup>60</sup>

Similarly, the Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong argued that the “cost of the virgin myth” results in sexist attitudes toward women by rendering Mary as an ideal woman, and so making all other women inadequate. Thus the birth narratives from Matthew and Luke have exercised an oppressive influence on the life of women in the church, according to Spong. While Spong concedes that the image of the Virgin Mary and the virginal conception of Jesus have provided certain comfort to the faithful down through the ages,

<sup>59</sup> *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 392. More recently comparable claims have been made by the conservative evangelical author R. Gromacki, *The Virgin Birth: A Biblical Study of the Deity of Jesus Christ*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2002).

<sup>60</sup> *The Illegitimacy of Jesus*, 171. Schaberg suffered significant hate mail and even the fire-bombing of her car after her book was first published in 1987.

he laments the patriarchal heritage of the Christian tradition in which God is father and Mary is the virgin mother. Christian tradition glorified Mary the virgin, and at the same time turned the faithful disciple Mary Magdalene into a prostitute. Sex became identified with sinful flesh. Sin became the first sexually transmitted disease. And the sinlessness of Jesus came to depend on the virginal status of Mary, which then required a sinless Jesus from birth rather than a Jesus who struggled with faith as a human being.<sup>61</sup>

We have seen charges of a sinful birth and claims for a sinless virgin birth unfold in a swirl around the birth narratives of Jesus and the traditions that followed. From accusations that Jesus was considered an illegitimate child to affirmations that Jesus was the child most favored by God, Christian and non-Christian voices have sparred in and among themselves for centuries on end. We have surely not settled the matter. My hope is that we have elucidated many of the factors that went into the retrospective theologizing of sinlessness onto the traditions surrounding Jesus' birth. This discussion of the perfectly sinful birth of Jesus, then, will lead us in the next chapter to the baptism of Jesus and to the inauguration of a perfectly sinful ministry.

<sup>61</sup> Spong, *Born of a Woman*, 201–224. Much harsher are the conclusions of G. Lüdemann, *Virgin Birth?* He states outright: “Jesus’ wretched tomb was full and his glorious manger was empty – that may be said to be the overall conclusion of my work” (p. 149).

## From Repentant to Righteous Baptism

**I**N MOVING FROM THE BIRTH OF JESUS TO HIS BAPTISM AND THE beginning of his public ministry, we shift from territory best suited for metaphorical and mythic analysis to a very real Jordan River with a very historical John the Baptist who baptized people for forgiveness of sins. Indeed, the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist is one firm piece of historical evidence that virtually all scholars agree took place, a baptism that provides in many ways the fundamental entry point into the public ministry of Jesus. Since Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, he must have identified with John's ministry in some significant way. He certainly met a similar fate as a kind of rogue independent prophet with a popular following that made the established religious and, by extension, political leaders of his day nervous in the extreme. And yet John the Baptist also posed a significant problem for the earliest Christian movement. John was problematic in several regards. (1) Most obvious, because John was baptizing for repentance and the forgiveness of sins, why was the proverbial sinless Jesus getting baptized by John? (2) Typically the one doing the baptizing is seen as having authority over the one being baptized, making John appear to be superior to Jesus simply by virtue of the baptism itself. (3) John the Baptist did not stop his ministry after Jesus was baptized, even after Jesus began his own ministry with his own disciples. It appears that the disciples of John the Baptist continued their cause not only after the death of their master, but also after the rise of the Christian movement. John's baptism of Jesus was apparently so well known in early Christian tradition that there was no way around acknowledging this important event linking Jesus and John, his senior prophet. This left Christian tradition in a bit of a quandary. As John Meier has nicely put it, "The Baptist constituted a stone of stumbling right at the beginning of Christianity's story of Jesus, a stone too well

known to be ignored or denied, a stone that each evangelist had to come to terms with as best he could.”<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter we will explore early Christian embarrassment associated with Jesus’ baptism by John, as well as how various Christians tried to explain why Jesus submitted to John the Baptist’s baptism for repentance and forgiveness of sins. In the process we will see how the sinlessness and perfection of Jesus were read into this story in particular. It was bad enough that Jesus appeared to be born in sin, but at least he bore no immediate personal responsibility for that status. But to have an adult Jesus, responsible for his own actions, willingly submit himself to a baptism for repentance of sins was more difficult to explain. It was therefore all the more urgent for early Christians to find a way to make sense of the baptism in view of their conviction that Jesus was the resurrected and sinless Son of God. Thus, whereas the birth stories were likely the very last part of the Jesus tradition to be formed, the story of Jesus’ baptism was likely the very first part of the Jesus story to be widely known and accepted. It was such a core part of the story of Jesus that it was impossible for later Christians to disentangle Jesus completely from some association with the Baptist, for better and for worse, and with his own baptism under John.

### CONFLATED AND CONFUSED

The story of Jesus’ baptism by John is told in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. A related narrative is found in the Gospel of John, and reference to the baptism by John plays a significant role in two passages from the Acts of the Apostles (in relation to replacing the disciple Judas in Acts 1<sup>2</sup> and in a discussion of the apostle Apollos in Acts 18). Each of the baptism stories in Matthew, Mark, and Luke is somewhat different, and these differences will help us to understand both what and why changes were made in the transmission of the story. One of the obstacles in coming to a better comprehension of the baptism stories is an understandable tendency to conflate the different stories and, as a result, to emerge with a completely new conglomerate that seeks to reconcile the

<sup>1</sup> J. Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 2: *Mentor, Message, and Miracles* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 22.

<sup>2</sup> So important was the connection to John the Baptist that, when it came time to replace the disgraced and deceased Judas among the twelve apostles, Luke has Peter give the qualifications of the new apostle as “one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection” (Acts 1:21–22).

differences between the various accounts of the baptism of Jesus. While the reason for such conflation is easy to comprehend, it remains important for us to be able to tease out the individual and distinctive voices of different Christians who told the story in one way and not another. And while some of the differences between the accounts may appear to be minor, we will see that these differences are in fact rather important.

Conflation makes sense for a church and a tradition that is seeking to relate the story of Jesus as a coherent whole. In constructing such a story out of the different Gospel accounts various discrepancies between the Gospels are typically smoothed over, sometimes in minor ways, and sometimes in much more significant ways. Thus, if one asks the average Christian (whoever that might be) to relate the story of Jesus' baptism, one would likely get some form of a conflated story that took pieces from different versions of the story and wove a new story in their place. There would be something about Jesus, John, and baptism, but beyond that people would introduce different features of the story. This process can readily be seen, for example, in how the baptism scene is depicted in various film versions about the life of Jesus. The 1965 film *The Greatest Story Ever Told* has Charlton Heston as a hairy well-spoken John the Baptist, and the distinguished Swedish actor Max von Sydow playing a compelling Jesus. The famed director George Stevens chose to depict the scene with a deep sense of reverence, a humble John the Baptist who knows the identity of Jesus, and a Jesus who is baptized without any subsequent heavenly voice. We are shown not the actual baptism, but only John reaching for the water in the Jordan River, and a wet-headed Jesus going off to the temptation scene. By sharp contrast the 1988 film *The Last Temptation of Christ*, based on the 1960 novel by Nikos Kazantzakis of the same title, directed by Martin Scorsese, shows a wild-eyed ranting John the Baptist amid his naked frenzied followers in an ecstatic state, a John the Baptist who is not sure if Jesus is "the one." After baptizing Jesus, the Baptist argues with him over what the message of God truly is – judgment (so John) or love (so Jesus) – though later Jesus will decide that judgment, the ax, and open rebellion against Rome is the message after all. Jesus (played by Willem Dafoe) will change his mind one last time and reluctantly embrace the cross, all with the help of the much stronger and more faithful Judas (played by Harvey Keitel).

The 2000 film *The Miracle Maker*,<sup>3</sup> a combination of stop-action claymation blended with cartoon flashbacks, has perhaps the most intriguing

<sup>3</sup> The film, a surprisingly effective if little known portrayal of the story of Jesus, has a well-known cast of voices, including Ralph Feinnes (as Jesus), Julie Christie, John Hurt, and Albert Molina.

approach to the baptism story. It conflates all four Gospel versions into a scene that has everything: Jesus coming for baptism by John (Matthew and Mark), John the Baptist seeing Jesus and declaring “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John), an overwrought Baptist’s demur that Jesus should baptize him instead (Matthew), a baptism where John never touches Jesus (Luke, John) as he immerses himself in the Jordan River, and the heavens opening with a divine spotlight coming down on Jesus and a heavenly voice saying both “You are my beloved son” (Mark, Luke) and “This is my beloved son” (Matthew), capped off with a heavenly dove fly-by. No reason is given for the baptism. Instead the film adds a statement by Jesus, “John, when we were children we played by this river. Our mothers called and we ran to them. We followed them. Now there is another call. My Father in heaven; and I must follow.” The narrative of the film invokes Luke’s depiction of Jesus and John as cousins who have known each other from birth, though in contrast to Luke (7:18–19) the film version shows a John who knows precisely that Jesus is the messiah.<sup>4</sup> While such conflation is commonplace, it actually masks the difficulties that the Gospel writers had with this story. To see more clearly the problem of Jesus’ baptism, it is important for us to address each of the Gospel versions on its own terms.

### MURKY WATERS

In order to isolate each of the Gospel accounts of the baptism story it will be helpful for us to line them up in parallel columns to make comparing and contrasting them easier:

There is surprisingly little in common to all four versions of the story: Jesus, baptism, and the Spirit descending like a dove. And although the Gospel of John is clearly the odd one out, as ever in contrast to the Synoptic Gospels, significant differences remain even across the Synoptic Gospels.

### MARK: BEGINNING WITH BAPTISM

Mark’s version of the baptism story is remarkably brief and concise. It follows a similarly concise introduction to the Gospel (1:1) and

<sup>4</sup> The late second-century Christian writer Tatian, who compiled a harmony of all four Gospels into one mega-Gospel known as the *Diatessaron* (literally “through the four”) manages, like *The Miracle Maker*, to include nearly all the different elements from the four Gospels. See the *Diatessaron* in A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 9 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1896), 49–50.



Matthew 3:13–17	Mark 1:9–11	Luke 3:21–22	John 1:29–34
<p><u>Matt. 3:13</u> Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him.</p> <p><u>Matt. 3:14</u> John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”</p> <p><u>Matt. 3:15</u> But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented.</p> <p><u>Matt. 3:16</u> And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.</p> <p><u>Matt. 3:17</u> And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”</p>	<p><u>Mark 1:9</u> In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.</p> <p><u>Mark 1:10</u> And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.</p> <p><u>Mark 1:11</u> And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”</p>	<p><u>Luke 3:21</u> Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying,</p> <p><u>Luke 3:22</u> the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove.</p> <p>And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved;</p>	<p><u>John 1:29</u> The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”</p> <p><u>John 1:30</u> This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’</p> <p><u>John 1:31</u> I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.”</p> <p><u>John 1:32</u> And John testified, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him.</p> <p><u>John 1:33</u> I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the</p>

*(cont.)*

<b>Matthew 3:13–17</b>	<b>Mark 1:9–11</b>	<b>Luke 3:21–22</b>	<b>John 1:29–34</b>
		with you I am well pleased.”	one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ <u>John 1:34</u> And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.”

introduction to John the Baptist (“John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,” 1:4). No birth story. No introductory narrative aside from the narrator’s recognition up front that this story is about Jesus, who is both Christ and Son of God (at least in most manuscripts; 1:1). After the quick introduction of John, and immediately after having John the Baptist refer to someone greater than he who was to come (1:7–8), Mark simply states that Jesus came and was baptized by John (1:9). No reason is given; no explanation of their relationship is offered or assumed. The reader is simply to understand that the one more powerful than John is Jesus. Mark then takes on the role of omniscient narrator, telling us what Jesus saw and what he heard in this commissioning epiphany (1:10–11): “he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased,’” an echo from Psalm 2:7.

Mark views the coming of John the Baptist as prelude to the coming of Jesus, because not John the Baptist but Jesus will lead to the coming of the kingdom of God (1:15). While each of the Gospels distances Jesus from John the Baptist in one way or another, Mark’s approach to dealing with John intrudes least into the story. But even here we can see Mark’s discomfort with Jesus’ baptism by John. Thus Mark frames the baptism by beginning with fulfillment motifs (1:2–3) showing the Baptist as mere forerunner and by closing with the arrest and imprisonment of John (1:14). In this way Mark diminishes John before the baptism occurs and gets John out of the way immediately after the baptism. Mark seems confident that his emphasis on the greater power of Jesus in relation to

John will be enough to diffuse worries about Jesus submitting to John. Perhaps Mark thinks this will also cover over the difficulty of Jesus appearing to repent of his sins along with the other penitents who came to John for this transformational baptism. Mark does not say one way or another. But it is difficult to think that Mark would go out of his way to subordinate John to Jesus only to have John essentially presiding over not only Jesus' baptism but his confession of sins as well. More likely, Mark wants to present Jesus as being prepared to pick up where John left off – especially in light of John's impending arrest and imprisonment. In all of this Mark demonstrates a retrospective understanding of John and his relationship to Jesus.

None of Mark's discomfort with the scene, however, really does away with the basic problem: Jesus submits to a baptism for repentance and forgiveness of sins.<sup>5</sup> *Why* does Jesus do this? Why does Mark allow Jesus to do this? Given the prominence of the tradition he clearly has no choice but to link Jesus to the ministry of the Baptist in a significant way. Perhaps Mark is confident that his presentation of the story has undercut any associations of Jesus with his own repentance of sins. That Jesus was baptized by John is presented in Mark simply as a given. What this baptism really means is open-ended. That it actually took place is undisputed.

But what would others have thought on seeing Jesus getting baptized? Here we move from Mark's literary and theological depiction of the scene to a more historical question. It is unlikely that the baptism was a private affair between Jesus and John alone. Mark's depiction suggests significant groups of people coming for baptism "from the whole Judean countryside" and that "all the people from Jerusalem were going out to him" (1:5). Jesus goes to John as one among many. Presumably, others would have seen Jesus not as a sinner *per se*, that is, as a particularly immoral individual, but as a penitent who had chosen to receive John's baptism for forgiveness of sins, with its inherent recommitment to pursue a radical faithfulness to God. We can speculate all we want about what Jesus thought was going on, but it will never rise above just that – speculation. Although much psychologizing has gone on to get behind Jesus' baptismal

<sup>5</sup> The first-century Jewish historian Josephus reports that John's baptism was for the purification of the body (*hagneia tou sōmatos*); *Antiquities* 18.117; see W.D. Davies and D.C. Allison, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), vol. 1: 320–345.

experience,<sup>6</sup> we should recognize that we have no real access to the meaning of this experience for Jesus. The event does show Jesus identifying with the ministry of John the Baptist and his apocalyptic message. It also clearly functions as an important point of transformation in the life of Jesus, but beyond this it is difficult to say more with confidence.

Mark's choice to adopt the perspective of an omniscient narrator at this point is of special interest (Mark will do the same later in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus is praying alone; see Mark 14:34–36). In so doing Mark gives us a sense of how the baptism story was understood by the earliest Christians – as a clear revelation of the identity of Jesus from the perspective of both God and Jesus, if not yet evident to anyone else. In light of their belief that God had raised Jesus from the dead as God's son, and in view of their conviction that the identity of Jesus as the Son of God had also been revealed on the cross (on the lips of the centurion, 15:39), Mark reflects the early Christian retrojection of this faith back to this crucial opening baptismal scene, to be recapitulated in the transfiguration story of Mark 9. But in Mark's baptism story only Jesus receives the divine epiphany; it will remain a secret to others. This approach ties in well with Mark's messianic secret motif, where true understanding of and belief in Jesus will take place only in the light of his death and resurrection.<sup>7</sup>

Theologically, then, Mark's understanding of the baptism of Jesus comes across with relative clarity. As the narrator in Mark 1:1 has already declared the identity of Jesus as Christ and Son of God even before the story begins, now this identity is bestowed on Jesus at the beginning of the narrative proper, at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry launched by his baptism (1:11). Mark has left open the life of Jesus before this, but certainly with an implicit trajectory that will lead to God's being well pleased with him. Does Mark conceive that Jesus has repented of sin by virtue of getting baptized by John? This is unlikely, especially given the other currents of early Christian theologizing taking place in parallel streams. Does Mark envision that Jesus has been adopted as God's son in the baptism event? Perhaps.<sup>8</sup> But in truth

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., D. Capps, *Jesus: A Psychological Biography* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000), and B. Chilton, *Rabbi Jesus: An Intimate Biography* (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 41–63.

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., D. Watson, *Honor Among Christians: The Cultural Key to the Messianic Secret* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), and H. Räisänen, *The "Messianic Secret" in Mark's Gospel* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> See the discussion, e.g., in A.Y. Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2007), 138–156, and J. Marcus, *Mark 1–8* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 149–166.

I doubt that Mark was all that worried about the detailed nuances of precisely how and when Jesus came to be the Son of God. In the end Mark does not so much solve the problem of Jesus' baptism by John as he does simply use it as a springboard to get Jesus off and running as John's successor, proclaiming the imminent coming of God's kingdom, and the need for people of faith to repent and prepare for the in-breaking of this impending eschatological reality.

Whereas both Matthew and Luke will have birth narratives to provide a larger frame for understanding the baptism, Mark simply begins his story of Jesus here. Or perhaps we should say that this is where Mark really begins re-reading the Jewish Scriptures, first in relation to John the Baptist, and most important in relation to Jesus.<sup>9</sup> Here again we can see the process of retrospective theologizing at work, reading the sacred scriptures of the Jewish and incipient Christian faith in light of the conviction that Jesus is indeed the Christ and the Son of God (Mark 1:1). If Jewish tradition read the scriptures for clues about the identity of the messiah,<sup>10</sup> and by and large concluded that a crucified Jesus did not fit the bill, the earliest Christians approached things rather differently. They already believed they knew the identity of the messiah, Jesus, and so they began to reread their scriptures in light of this conviction – looking for resonances between their scriptures and their collective experience of the life, death, and resurrection of their Lord, Jesus. Thus while non-Christian Jews affirmed that if you read the scriptures you will know who the messiah is (not Jesus), the earliest Jewish Christians affirmed instead that if you know that Jesus is the messiah you will know how to read the scriptures anew. For Mark, likely writing for a mixed group of Jewish and Gentile Christians, this re-reading begins in chapter 1:2, which will lead directly to the identity of John the Baptist and the brief account of Jesus' baptism.

Although Mark states that he is citing the prophet Isaiah, he actually has produced in 1:2 a mixture of two passages not found in Isaiah, Exodus 23:20 (“Behold, I am sending my messenger before you, to keep you on the way, to bring you to the land that I have prepared for you”),<sup>11</sup> and Malachi 3:1 (“See,

<sup>9</sup> On Mark's use of the Jewish Scriptures, see especially J. Marcus, *The Way of the Lord: Christological Exegesis of the Old Testament in the Gospel of Mark* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), and D. Juel, *Messianic Exegesis* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998).

<sup>10</sup> See John 7:41–43.

<sup>11</sup> This is my translation of the Septuagint version of the passage, which Mark would have used. The Hebrew original reads slightly differently: “I am going to send an angel in front of you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared.”

I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me”). He caps his introduction to John the Baptist with a direct quote in 1:3 from Isaiah 40:3 (“A voice cries out: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God’”). Mark has identified the role of John the Baptist as the messenger of God who is preparing the way of the Lord, keeping the people on the path so that they may enter into the place that God has prepared for them. It is possible that these three passages from the Jewish Scriptures were already linked in oral tradition, as each speaks of “preparing the way.” The Exodus 20 and Malachi 3 passages also both refer to the sending of God’s messenger.<sup>12</sup> Of course, Mark also could have combined these texts himself as he reflected on the ministry of John the Baptist in relation to his convictions about Jesus. Using the motif of preparation, grounded in scripture, to characterize John’s ministry is an effective way for Mark to subordinate John to Jesus, in anticipation of the baptism scene. John merely foreshadows Jesus; he does not upstage him.

The identity of Jesus as the central character in this divine drama finds clear affirmation in the baptism scene proper, told in three short verses (1:9–11). Mark states in a matter-of-fact manner that Jesus was baptized by John (1:9). But then Mark introduces apocalyptic features that set Jesus apart in a radical way. As he comes up out of the water Jesus sees the heavens not “opened” but *schizomenous* – ripped apart, torn open (1:10). The vivid language conveys an event of cosmic scope paralleled only by the apocalyptic death of Jesus in Mark 15:38, where the last breath of Jesus leads to the curtain of the temple being ripped in two, the only other place Mark uses the word *schizō*. In his baptism Jesus receives the Spirit through ripped heavens and is declared the Son of God by none other than God (1:11). In his death Jesus gives up his spirit amid ripped Temple curtains (that had symbolically contained God’s Spirit) and is declared the Son of God by the centurion (15:39).<sup>13</sup> The apocalyptic event of the revelation of Jesus as God’s son in the baptism will find its bookend in the apocalyptic event of the revelation of Jesus as God’s son on the cross.

Mark makes the baptism of Jesus not just an apocalyptic event, with the Spirit of God ripping through the heavens, but also a theophany – an appearance of the divine in the form of the heavenly voice declaring to

<sup>12</sup> See Marcus, *Mark* 1–8, 141–149; see also Collins, *Mark*, 133–138.

<sup>13</sup> See Marcus, *Mark* 1–8, 164–165; D. Juel, *Mark* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1990), 34–35. Marcus puts it well: “God has ripped the heavens irrevocably apart at Jesus’ baptism never to shut them again. Through this gracious gash in the universe, he has poured forth his Spirit into the earthly realm” (*Mark*, 165).

Jesus, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (1:11). This is another of Mark’s composite citations from the Jewish Scriptures, this time blending Psalm 2:7 (“you are my son”) with Isaiah 42:1 (“my chosen, in whom my soul delights”), with perhaps a touch of Genesis 22:2 (“your beloved [or “your only”] son”), from the story of Abraham’s near-sacrifice of Isaac – the *akedah* (the binding of Isaac). The cluster of themes that Mark introduces with these various borrowings from the Jewish scriptures is impressive and creates a network of meanings that build exponentially on each other. By invoking these passages, Mark is able to blend a royal messianic psalm (Ps. 2) with a passage about God’s delightful chosen servant who has God’s Spirit and will bring about justice to the nations (i.e., Gentiles; Isa. 42), and cap it off with a reference to the so-called sacrifice of Isaac, the only son, the beloved son, of Abraham (Gen. 22). In this way Mark has created a pastiche of images that communicates something of the depth of Jesus’ identity – the Davidic messiah, chosen by God, empowered by God’s Spirit, the true sacrificial victim of a faithful God on behalf of humanity. Thus, while Mark has used various texts from the Jewish scriptures to underscore John the Baptist’s role as one who *prepares* the way (1:2–3), Mark has also used a cluster of biblical passages to highlight the identity of Jesus as the royal messiah in whom God delights, the beloved Son of God whose sacrificial death will result in salvation (10:45).<sup>14</sup> All of this in one divine statement (1:11) that only Jesus hears, but that Mark narrates. Mark has moved a long way beyond the potential scandal of the baptism.

#### MATTHEW: RIGHTEOUS BAPTISM

And yet as clearly as Mark has circumscribed the identity of Jesus in the baptism scene, Matthew’s appropriation of Mark’s baptism story goes even further in distancing Jesus from any possible embarrassment in relation to sin and subordination resulting from his baptism by John. Whereas Mark begins his Gospel with the events surrounding the baptism, Matthew begins with an elaborate genealogy and birth narrative that already clearly identifies Jesus as Son of Abraham, Son of David, and the son miraculously born of the divine Spirit (Matt. 1). Matthew has also clearly presented Jesus as the new Moses, born under similar circumstances of danger and of royal heritage like

<sup>14</sup> See the significant parallels in Jewish tradition discussed by Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995).

Moses, who comes up out of Egypt to lead his people for God (Matt. 2). So by the time we reach the baptism scene in Matthew 3, there can be no doubt that Jesus is superior to John the Baptist and that he certainly cannot be associated with sin given his divine origins. As we have already seen in the birth story, Jesus' entire destiny is to "save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). The baptism story provides Matthew with the opportunity to remove any doubt that Jesus is guilty of sin.

While Mark simply relates that Jesus was baptized by John (1:9), Matthew changes this report of what has already happened to a statement of purpose: "Jesus came from Galilee to John, at the Jordan, to be baptized by him" (Matt. 3:13). This creates an opening between the intention of Jesus and the actual baptism. This opening allows Matthew to insert an important dialogue between Jesus and John so that Matthew can directly address concerns of sin and subordination. This dialogue, found only in Matthew, is Matthew's way of solving the problem that he clearly thought Mark had not sufficiently fixed. Like Mark, Matthew does include John's statement that "one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (3:11). But for Matthew this statement of John's inferior status must be repeated in the actual baptism scene. And so, Matthew tells us (3:13–15):

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented.

The dialogue between Jesus and John demonstrates that John immediately recognizes Jesus as the "one who is more powerful than I," whose baptism of fire and spirit is superior to John's water baptism. Ironically, while it is clear why John would want to be baptized by Jesus' greater baptism of fire and spirit, it is not at all clear why Jesus would want to be baptized by John's inferior water baptism, especially as it carries with it the association of forgiveness for repentance of sin (3:6).

And so, having solved the first problem of apparent subordination of Jesus to John, Matthew now turns his attention to the second problem: submission to a baptism for repentance and forgiveness of sin. Why must Jesus be baptized by John, especially over against John's protests that he should be baptized by Jesus instead? Matthew's Jesus gives a somewhat enigmatic answer in response to John's reluctance. "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness" (3:15). Basically, it appears that John relents because Jesus has said he needs to. Why does Jesus need to be



baptized? Why is it proper? Well, quite simply, it must be proper because Jesus did so. If Jesus was baptized by John, then that alone shows Jesus had a good reason for doing so, even if we do not completely understand it, according to Matthew. Jesus was not baptized because it was right to do so; it was right to do so because Jesus was baptized.<sup>15</sup>

What made the baptism appropriate was that it fulfilled all righteousness. This is a curious phrase, but one that fits squarely into Matthew's larger depiction of Jesus. The motif of fulfilling all righteousness raises two primary categories that Matthew will use to help define the ministry of Jesus: fulfillment and righteousness. Matthew is deeply committed to the understanding of Jesus as the culmination of God's promises to Israel; Jesus literally fulfills all of Israel's hopes and dreams, all of Israel's potential, all of Israel's scriptures. For Matthew, since Jesus is the messiah he must also fulfill scripture. And since he fulfills scripture he must also be the messiah. Fifteen times, more than any other writing in the New Testament, Matthew speaks of Jesus fulfilling an aspect of Israel's heritage, typically with a specific proof text.<sup>16</sup>

In the context of the dialogue between Jesus and John the Baptist Matthew does not have Jesus say precisely what is being fulfilled aside from "all righteousness." Righteousness is another favorite term for Matthew, with twenty-one references.<sup>17</sup> The need for true righteousness is at the heart of Jesus' preaching in Matthew, as can be readily seen from the importance of the term in the most significant section of Jesus' teaching in Matthew, the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7): "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness" (5:6); "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake" (5:10); and "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (5:20). Fulfilling all righteousness means comporting totally with God's will. Matthew can even have Jesus state that "John came to you in the way of righteousness" (21:32). But why Matthew views Jesus' submission to John's baptism of repentance as fulfilling all righteousness is not at all self-evident. Is it the right thing to do because it seals the transition between John as preparing the way for God's kingdom (3:1–3) and Jesus coming to initiate it (4:17)? Does the baptism fulfill all righteousness as a kind of generic fulfillment of scripture? Does the baptism show Jesus identifying with repentant sinners, and so marks the first step in

<sup>15</sup> See Davies and Allison, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 320–340.

<sup>16</sup> See Matt. 1:22; 2:15, 17, 23; 3:15; 4:14; 5:17; 8:17; 12:17; 13:14, 35; 21:4; 26:54, 56; and 27:9.

<sup>17</sup> See Matt. 1:19; 3:15; 5:6, 10, 20, 45; 6:33; 9:13; 10:41; 13:17, 43, 49; 21:32; 23:28–29, 35; and 25:37, 46.

Jesus' mission to save his people from their sins (culminating in his death)? Matthew is content to be vague at this point. All he gives us is the simple assertion that Jesus needs to be baptized by John to fulfill all righteousness. Although Matthew may believe that he has improved on Mark's version, and has better explained away the problems of sin and submission, Matthew's approach is not without problems. He can presume the birth narrative as divine backdrop for the baptism story, and he can have John declare his own inferiority to Jesus, but how it is that the baptism fulfills all righteousness remains unclear. Matthew is simply convinced that this is the case.<sup>18</sup>

Having dealt with the problems of sin and subordination, Matthew can proceed to the baptism of Jesus itself. Matthew follows Mark's version fairly closely, but with some subtle differences. Two differences stand out. First, Matthew tones down Mark's language of the heavens being ripped open, using instead the much tamer word *anoigō*, which simply means "open" without the dramatic flare of the heavens being ripped or torn open. Second, and more important, when the divine voice speaks, it speaks not to Jesus but to the people gathered for baptism. Rather than a direct address to Jesus, the heavenly voice makes a declaration, a pronouncement, to the people as a whole (3:17): "And a voice from heaven said, '*This* is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'" It is significant that this is not the first time the reader realizes that Jesus is God's son, as the birth narrative has prepared the ground for that. But the baptism scene serves as the first time that this identity is declared publicly within Matthew's story. Matthew follows Mark in drawing the pronouncement from a combination of motifs from Psalm 2:7, Isaiah 42:1, and Genesis 22:2, though it appears Matthew is as much indebted to Mark as to any of the allusions to the Jewish Scriptures.

Still, the Isaiah 42 passage plays a more significant role in Matthew than in Mark. This can be seen from the centrality Matthew gives to Isaiah 42:1–4 later on in his Gospel as a summary comment in 12:17–21 on the Sabbath controversies in 12:1–16. Here Jesus disputes with the Jewish leaders over his disciples plucking grain on the Sabbath (12:1–8) and over Jesus' healing of a man with a withered hand (12:9–16) on the Sabbath. Matthew quotes from Isaiah 42:1–4 as a fulfillment citation:

This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah:

"Here is my servant, whom I have chosen,  
my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased.

<sup>18</sup> See the discussion in Davies and Allison, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 320–327, and U. Luz, *Matthew 1–7* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1989), 173–178.

I will put my Spirit upon him,  
 and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.  
 He will not wrangle or cry aloud,  
 nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets.  
 He will not break a bruised reed  
 or quench a smoldering wick  
 until he brings justice to victory.  
 And in his name the Gentiles will hope.”

This citation is remarkable in several regards. First, it shows how important the Isaiah 42 passage is for Matthew, and not only here in chapter 12. It reinforces the significance of this text for Matthew’s understanding of the baptism scene as well. Second, Matthew’s version of the Isaiah 42 passage here is rather different from either the Hebrew or the Septuagint versions. Since Matthew was most likely using the Septuagint text, he has clearly introduced some significant changes that serve his development of Christology. The simplest way to see this is to compare the Hebrew, the Septuagint (Greek), and the Matthean versions in parallel columns.<sup>19</sup>

Matthew’s redactional changes begin with shifting the Septuagint’s specific reference to Jacob and Israel to the more generic “my servant” (*pais*). He also changes the Septuagint’s “my chosen” to “my beloved.” This is in keeping with the way Matthew has cited Isaiah 42:1 in the declaration of the heavenly voice after Jesus’ baptism in Matthew 3:17 (importing Ps. 2:7 in the process). As we saw earlier, the term “my beloved” may be an echo of Abraham’s “beloved son,” Isaac (Gen. 22:2). Perhaps Matthew’s reference to Jesus as the “son of Abraham” in 1:1 places Jesus in a parallel relationship to Isaac, especially in light of the sacrificial overtones in both the story of Isaac and the story of Jesus. Both Isaac and Jesus are sons of Abraham. There is also a connection between Isaac as Abraham’s *paidarion* (servant, child; Gen. 22:5, 12) and the beloved *pais* (servant, child) found in both the Septuagint version of Isaiah 42:1 and in Matthew’s citation of it in 12:18, which Matthew clearly sees as a reference to Jesus. Although Jesus is God’s son (*huios*) in Matthew, Jesus is also presented as God’s faithful servant (*pais*), which highlights the obedience of Jesus to God, just as Isaac was obedient to Abraham. Matthew preserves the Septuagint’s emphasis on the nations, the Gentiles (Isa. 42:1, 4; Matt. 12:18, 21), which will be significant for Matthew at the end of the Gospel (28:16–20).

<sup>19</sup> The versions of Isaiah from the Hebrew and from Matthew are from the NRSV translation. The Septuagint translation from the Greek is by M. Silva from *A New English Translation of the Septuagint*, ed. A. Pietersma and B. Wright (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Isaiah 42:1–4 (Hebrew)	Isaiah 42:1–4 (Septuagint)	Isaiah 42:1–4 (Matthew 12)
<u>Isa. 42:1</u> Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.	<u>Isa. 42:1</u> Jacob is my servant; I will lay hold of him; Israel is my chosen; my soul has accepted him; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth judgment to the nations.	<u>Matt. 12:18</u> Here is my servant, whom I have chosen, my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.
<u>Isa. 42:2</u> He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street;	<u>Isa. 42:2</u> He will not cry out or send forth his voice, nor will his voice be heard outside;	<u>Matt. 12:19</u> He will not wrangle or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets.
<u>Isa. 42:3</u> a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice.	<u>Isa. 42:3</u> a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoking wick he will not quench, but he will bring forth judgment for truth.	<u>Matt. 12:20</u> He will not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick until he brings justice to victory.
<u>Isa. 42:4</u> He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching.	<u>Isa. 42:4</u> He will blaze up and not be overwhelmed until he has established judgment on the earth, and nations will hope in his name.	<u>Matt. 12:21</u> And in his name the Gentiles will hope.

Further, only Matthew includes this citation from Isaiah 42 as a fulfillment of prophecy in relation to Jesus' Sabbath violations recounted in Matthew 12:1–16. As Jerome Neyrey has observed regarding Matthew's use of Isaiah 42 in this context, issues about Jesus' authority, his empowerment by the Spirit, and the judgment of nonbelievers are all significant motifs in the quotation.<sup>20</sup> These motifs, in turn, form major themes of Matthew 12. Thus, in addition to the portrait of Jesus as the obedient servant of God, Matthew uses Isaiah 42 to depict Jesus as the center of controversy and judgment, challenging the Pharisees about what it means to be faithful to

<sup>20</sup> J. Neyrey, "The Thematic Use of Isaiah 42:1–4 in Matthew 12," *Biblica* 63 (1982): 457–473. See also R. Beaton, *Isaiah's Christ in Matthew's Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 122–173.

God, and continuing his polemic against the synagogue. By fulfilling Isaiah 42:1–4 Matthew's Jesus shows himself to be God's beloved, obedient, and challenging son. If his baptism provided a challenge for how Matthew should rid him of associations with sin and submission, his empowerment by God's Spirit and his fulfillment of scripture only strengthened Matthew's conviction that Jesus was the perfectly obedient and authoritative Son of God.

#### LUKE: JOHN WHO?

Luke alone among the Gospels introduces John the Baptist by presenting a dedicated birth story (Luke 1), miraculous in its own way since John's mother Elizabeth was barren. Luke assigns John the Baptist a major role in his Gospel. In addition to having his own birth narrative, he leaps in his mother's womb at the sound of Mary's voice (1:41), and so bears witness to Jesus even before he is born. Luke views John as a pivotal link in the history of salvation, which can be seen in Luke 16:16, where Luke has Jesus say, "The law and the prophets were in effect until John came; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is proclaimed" (see also Matt. 11:12). Thus John marks a turning point, the end of one era and the beginning of another. He functions as a transitional figure, preparing the way for Jesus. Already in 3:18 Luke shows that John "proclaimed the good news [*euangelizō*] to the people." And in 7:20 John sends messengers to Jesus to ask if he is the one they have been waiting for. Jesus responds by saying: "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them" (7:22), all of which echoes the inaugural sermon of Jesus in Nazareth (4:16–30) where Jesus quotes from the prophet Isaiah (Isa. 61:1–2), and then proceeds in 7:1–16 to perform the same kind of prophetic miracles as the great prophets Elijah and Elisha.<sup>21</sup> Luke then inserts an editorial comment by way of criticizing the Pharisees for rejecting John's baptism: "But by refusing to be baptized by him, the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God's purpose for themselves" (7:30). In Acts 1, one of the criteria for Judas' replacement among the apostles is that an individual must have accompanied Jesus and the disciples "beginning with the baptism by John" (Acts 1:22). Although Luke casts John the Baptist as a great prophet, he nonetheless remains subordinate to Jesus in every

<sup>21</sup> See J.S. Siker, "First to the Gentiles: A Literary Analysis of Luke 4:16–30," *JBL* 111 (1992): 69–86.

way. In the Acts of the Apostles even John's baptism is not as good as the baptism that comes from the Spirit in Christ (Acts 18:25). Still, how will Luke address the problem of Jesus appearing to submit to a baptism for repentance and forgiveness of sin?

While Matthew sought to solve the problem of Jesus' baptism by John through the introduction of a dialogue between the two of them before the baptism, Luke takes a completely novel approach to the problems of sin and subordination. It is such a radical way of addressing the problem that most people do not even see it at first, because the composite reading of the baptism story has been so strong a tradition. Several things stand out in Luke's story of the baptism of Jesus (3:21–22), in contrast to what we see in the accounts from Mark and Matthew.

First, Luke's version is slightly more succinct even than Mark's version, which Luke uses as a written source. Second, Luke tells the story in the passive voice: "when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized" (3:21). Third, Luke adds one of his favorite motifs to the story – Jesus praying (3:21; see also 5:16; 6:12; 9:28; 11:1). Fourth, whereas both Mark and Matthew have the heavenly voice speaking just as Jesus is coming up from the baptismal waters, in Luke the baptism has already taken place, and the heavenly voice comes later, while Jesus prays afterward. And fifth, like Matthew, Luke also refers to the heavens being opened (not torn open as in Mark) and the Holy Spirit descending on Jesus like a dove; but Luke adds that the Spirit descended on Jesus in *bodily form*. Luke makes the coming of the Spirit much more physical.

This concretizing of the Spirit will nicely parallel Jesus overtly giving up the Spirit when he dies on the cross (Luke 23:46, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit"), as well as the assurance of the risen Jesus that his disciples will receive the Spirit (24:49). Luke's emphasis on the Spirit then connects directly with the Pentecost scene in Acts 2, where the Spirit comes upon the apostles with tongues of fire (2:3), again a very physical image, so that they speak in foreign languages, and the church is born. Indeed, it is not too much to say in Luke that God's Spirit is truly the main actor, and always has been – whether through the prophets of old, the culmination of the prophets in the coming of Jesus, or the giving of the Spirit to the young church. For Luke the Spirit of God is like a holy contagion that is infectious in the best sense of the term. This can already be seen in Luke 1, where Elizabeth, the Baptist's mother, is filled with the Holy Spirit when she hears the greeting from Mary and the child leaps in her womb (1:41). Luke manages, then, to work his own theological vision into this very short baptism scene. As Joel Green has observed, "Luke is less interested in Jesus'

baptism as such, and more concerned with his endowment with the Spirit and God's affirmation of his sonship."<sup>22</sup>

Beyond these differences, Luke follows Mark in having the heavenly voice address Jesus directly rather than addressing the assembled people, as in Matthew. Even though Luke's birth story about Jesus makes it quite clear that Jesus is born the Son of God (he "will be called the Son of the Most High," 1:32; "he will be called the Son of God," 1:35), Luke still employs Mark's version of the heavenly declaration at Jesus' baptism: "And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'" At this point, Luke's concern is with the identity of Jesus as God's son, which will be further established in the temptation story to follow in Luke 4.

But we still have not addressed the most important difference between Luke's version of the baptism of Jesus in comparison to Mark and Matthew. How does Luke solve the problem of sin and subordination associated with John's baptism? With deliberate ease. Luke simply removes John the Baptist from the scene. This explains why Luke narrates the baptism of Jesus in the passive voice. The text does not say that John baptized Jesus; John is never mentioned in Luke's version of Jesus' baptism. In fact, Luke goes out of his way to make absolutely sure that John *could not* have baptized Jesus. How? By forcibly removing John from the scene. Immediately before Luke narrates the baptism story we read the following in 3:19–20: "But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, added to them all by shutting up John in prison." Then in 3:21–22 the baptism story follows. So where is John the Baptist during the baptism of Jesus? In prison! Both Mark and Matthew include the story of John's imprisonment in their Gospels, but they have this story much later in the narrative (Mark 6:17; Matt. 14:3). This tells us that Luke intentionally took the arrest scene of John the Baptist from Mark 6 (well after the baptism) and moved it to immediately *before* the baptism of Jesus in Luke 3. In this way Luke takes the Baptist completely offstage and locks him away so that it is impossible for Jesus to have submitted to John's baptism of repentance for forgiveness of sins. So *why* was Jesus baptized in Luke, especially if John did not oversee it? And if Jesus was not baptized by John, then what kind of baptism was this? Again, Luke does not say, because Luke does not really care about these details. Like Mark and Matthew, Luke cannot avoid the tradition of the baptism story

<sup>22</sup> J. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 185.

because of its prominence, but he can certainly cover it over by having John arrested immediately before the baptism takes place. This subordinates John and highlights the outpouring of God's Spirit on Jesus.

One final observation about the baptism scene in Luke 3 is appropriate. Only Luke gives us a later interpretation of the baptism of Jesus on the lips of Jesus' postresurrection followers in the Acts of the Apostles. In the context of Acts 10 Luke has Peter describe something about the baptism of Jesus to Cornelius, the first Gentile convert to the Christian faith. In Acts 10:36–38 we read:

You know the message he [God] sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ – he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power (*echrisen auton ho theos pneumatī hagiō kai dunamei*); how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.

What stands out here is the description of Jesus' baptism as an "anointing" (*echrisen*), in which Jesus received the Holy Spirit. Empowered by that Spirit Jesus engaged in a ministry of healing and "doing good." Luke had already made it clear that Jesus' birth was through the agency of God's Spirit, a reality confirmed by story of the child Jesus in the Jerusalem Temple (Luke 2). Still, Luke presents Jesus as having the Spirit fully activated only by virtue of Jesus' baptism. This language of anointing in Acts 10:36–38 brings into view the inaugural sermon of Jesus in Luke 4:16–30, where Jesus quotes from Isaiah 61, that "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me (*echrisen me*) to bring good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18).<sup>23</sup>

The sequence of Jesus being born in the Spirit followed by his later reception of the Spirit in baptism around the age of thirty (3:23) raises some interesting questions, especially in light of Luke's statement that the child Jesus "grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him" (2:40). And again in 2:52, at the conclusion of the story of the twelve-year old Jesus in the Temple, we read, "And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor." Luke is not presenting a ready-born divine child in the sense that the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* did. Instead, Luke uses language of Jesus growing and increasing in wisdom. Luke does not

<sup>23</sup> See J. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I–IX* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), 481–483.



speculate on what kind of development Jesus went through as a human being, nor is this any kind of an issue for him.

In sum, Luke leaves us with an anomaly: the baptism by John is very important, and those who are truly seeking God's kingdom have undergone this baptism (7:30), but John's baptism is also merely transitional in character, pointing to a greater baptism of fire and Spirit with the ministry of Jesus.<sup>24</sup> John's baptism is crucial, but Jesus is not baptized by John. Just as Mark's and Matthew's solution to the problem of sin and subordination lead to other problems in the process, so does Luke's creative solution of simply removing John from the scene also raise additional questions about the story of Jesus' baptism.

#### JOHN: WHAT BAPTISM?

In turning to the Gospel of John's account of the baptism scene we arrive at the most extensive reworking of the baptism tradition among the four canonical Gospels. While it is unlikely that the fourth evangelist was familiar with the written versions of the Synoptic Gospels, there is every reason to believe that the author was very familiar with common oral traditions. The story of Jesus' baptism would be among the most significant stories within the oral traditions about Jesus, since it so clearly serves as the launching pad for Jesus' own ministry. We have seen the Synoptic Gospels all come up with their own solutions to the problem of potential sin and subordination as a result of the linkage between Jesus and John's baptism of repentance for forgiveness of sin. But in the Fourth Gospel this problem is completely resolved, and in an even more far-reaching manner than Luke had attempted. The Fourth Gospel goes further than simply having the Baptist state that the one who comes after him is greater (1:30), as in Mark. The Gospel writer does not introduce a dialogue between Jesus and John to explain the baptism, as in Matthew. Nor does he remove John the Baptist from the stage, as in Luke. Instead the Fourth Evangelist frames the story in such a way that not only is the Baptist infinitely inferior to Jesus (1:15, 19–21, 27), but Jesus is infinitely superior to John. The Fourth Gospel accomplishes this radical redefining of the relationship between Jesus and John in several ways.

First, the larger context of John's prologue makes it abundantly clear that to speak of God is to speak of Jesus. Jesus is the creative "word of God" (1:1)

<sup>24</sup> See W. Wink, *John the Baptist in the Gospel Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 82–86.

made flesh (1:14). It is difficult to come up with a higher Christology than this. But, second, not only is Jesus divine, even in the flesh, John the Baptist bears witness (his main task) that Jesus is also “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (1:29). The Baptist makes this declaration on seeing Jesus approach him for the first time. This is another excellent example of retrospective theologizing.<sup>25</sup> By reading the “Lamb of God” title back into the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, the Fourth Evangelist has effectively read the death of Jesus and its sacrificial meaning back into the baptism narrative. Just as Matthew read the saving death of Jesus back into his birth story (“You are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins,” Matt. 1:21), so now, by appealing to the image of the Lamb of God, the Gospel of John has retrojected the saving death of Jesus back on this encounter between John and Jesus (note that it is not a scene depicting the baptism of Jesus). The Fourth Gospel completely shifts the roles between John and Jesus. John the Baptist is known as the one baptizing for repentance and forgiveness of sins, but here in the Fourth Gospel the Baptist announces that *Jesus the Lamb of God* is the one who takes away sin, not John. Far from submitting to a baptism of repentance for sin, the Fourth Gospel shows Jesus as the source of forgiveness of sin.

Third, whereas Luke portrays John and Jesus as cousins, and Matthew puts them in dialogue, the Fourth Evangelist’s John the Baptist stresses repeatedly that he did not know Jesus (1:31, 33). They have no relationship. Jesus has never been among the Baptist’s disciples. Rather, John has come baptizing for the sole purpose of bearing witness to Jesus as the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit, for this one is the Son of God (1:33–34).

Fourth, the ministry of John the Baptist functions only to bear witness to Jesus. Nowhere does the Gospel of John state that John the Baptist baptizes people for repentance and forgiveness of sins. While all three Synoptic Gospels make this content of John’s preaching quite evident (Matt. 3:2; Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3), the Fourth Gospel never mentions it – even though the evangelist knows about and refers to John’s baptismal ministry (3:23).<sup>26</sup> Thus, not only does the Gospel of John completely distance Jesus from John, but John is radically subordinated to Jesus. It is no surprise that John tells his disciples, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (3:30). And sure enough,

<sup>25</sup> K. McDonnell refers to this process as “regressive theologizing” in *The Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 14.

<sup>26</sup> See C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), 171, who comments: “John’s baptism has no independent significance, but serves to point to what it cannot itself achieve, the taking away of the world’s sin by the Lamb of God.”

after this we never hear from John the Baptist again in the Fourth Gospel. All we hear is the echo of his testimony, as the evangelist's Jesus refers to the Baptist's witness to Jesus in John 5:33–36:

There is another who testifies on my behalf, and I know that his testimony to me is true. You sent messengers to John, and he testified to the truth. Not that I accept such human testimony, but I say these things so that you may be saved. He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light. But I have a testimony greater than John's. The works that the Father has given me to complete, the very works that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me.

The Father himself testifies to Jesus. Thus, while John's testimony is significant so far as it goes from a human point of view, it does not hold a candle in comparison to God's own testimony to the identity of Jesus as God's son (5:37). John the Baptist may have been a "burning and shining lamp," but compared with the light that Jesus brings (the "light of the world," 8:12), he is nothing but a pale reflection of the glory to come.

Fifth, and most important, while Luke goes so far as to remove John from the baptismal scene, the Gospel of John simply removes the baptism of Jesus altogether. John the Baptist is present to bear witness to Jesus, but no baptism occurs, at least no baptism with water. John the Baptist never touches Jesus, nor does he speak directly to Jesus; rather, he merely bears witness to his own disciples that Jesus is the one to follow (1:36–37, where the first disciples of Jesus come from John). The whole so-called baptism of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel is redundantly redundant.

- Twice John says he did not know Jesus (1:31, 33).
- Twice John calls Jesus the Lamb of God (1:29, 35).
- Twice John bears witness that the Spirit has descended on Jesus (1:32–33).
- Twice John states that he merely baptizes with water (1:31, 33).
- Twice John emphasizes that he himself is not the messiah (1:20; 3:28).

And all of this without an actual baptism taking place. The author of the Gospel of John appears to consider the coming of the Spirit upon Jesus as the true baptism, a spiritual baptism that Jesus will in turn communicate to others, so that they too might become children of God (1:12), a Spirit that Jesus will send to his disciples after his death and resurrection (John 14:16–17, 26; 16:13–14). But what could the Spirit add to Jesus that he did not already have as the incarnate Word of God? Or was the purpose of the Spirit descending upon Jesus simply to show John that Jesus is the one who is the source of God's fiery Spirit?

The Fourth Gospel so removes Jesus from any direct association with John the Baptist that the Baptist no longer poses any threat to Jesus in terms of sin or subordination. To be sure, the Gospel of John refers so often to the inferiority of John the Baptist to Jesus that we might get suspicious that the only reason the Fourth Gospel so stresses this theme is because people were in fact saying that Jesus was inferior to John, a charge that the evangelist had to rebut.<sup>27</sup> Still, the evangelist seems rather confident that the full divinity of Jesus will not in any way suffer from the inevitable presence of John the Baptist in the gospel story. He has little choice but to include him in some way, but John has become for all intents and purposes such a peripheral character that the evangelist can do with him what he will. And so he does.

### BAPTISMAL TRAJECTORIES

Beyond the four canonical Gospels early Christian reflection on and debate over the baptism of Jesus continued well through the first several centuries of Christianity. The question of *why* Jesus submitted to John's baptism remained important to explain. And explain they did. The questions about sin and subordination did not simply disappear. At the beginning of the second century Ignatius of Antioch made a couple of references to the baptism of Jesus, but with little substantive comment. In his letter to the Ephesians, Ignatius states that "Our God, Jesus Christ, was conceived by Mary according to the plan of God; he was from the seed of David, but also from the Holy Spirit. He was born and baptized, that he might cleanse the water by his suffering" (*Ignatius to the Ephesians* 18:2). Rather than the water cleansing Jesus, Jesus cleanses the water. Elsewhere Ignatius can repeat Matthew's assertion that Jesus submitted to John's baptism "that all righteousness might be fulfilled by him" (*Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans* 1:1).<sup>28</sup>

Around the same time as Ignatius of Antioch we find the apocryphal *Gospel of the Hebrews* (referred to much later by Jerome in his treatise *Against Pelagius*). In the context of discussing baptism, Jerome states:

In the Gospel according to the Hebrews, which is written in the Chaldee and Syrian language, but in Hebrew characters, and is used by the Nazarenes to this day . . . we find, "*Behold, the mother of our Lord and His brethren said to Him, John Baptist baptizes for the remission of sins; let us go*

<sup>27</sup> Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 171.

<sup>28</sup> The translation is from B.D. Ehrman, ed. and trans., *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

*and be baptized by him. But He said to them, what sin have I committed that I should go and be baptized by him?*<sup>29</sup>

Jerome quotes the Gospel according to the Hebrews approvingly at this point, since it provides evidence for a sinless Jesus who does not need to be baptized by John. This is not unlike the statement of Jesus in John's Gospel, where Jesus asks if anyone can convict him of sin (John 8:46).

In the mid-second century the apologist Justin Martyr (c. 150 CE) addressed the reasons for Jesus' baptism in his *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*. Justin makes it clear that Jesus did not need to be baptized for himself. It was not as if Jesus acquired any more power with his baptism than he already had at his birth. "As soon as He was born, He possessed His powers, and, growing up like any other man, He exercised appropriate powers at each stage of growth" (*Dialogue* 88).<sup>30</sup> When Jesus came to be baptized by John, he did so "solely for the sake of man, who from the time of Adam had become subject to death" (*Dialogue* 88). The problem was not that Jesus needed to be baptized but that the people thought of Jesus initially as the son of Joseph, a mere carpenter in their midst. Jesus submitted to baptism to demonstrate his true identity in the power of the Spirit. When the heavenly voice showed Jesus to be the Son of God, this was really the time when people "first realized who He was" (*Dialogue* 88). Thus Jesus submitted to baptism purely so that people would be able to identify him as the Son of God empowered by the Spirit.

A bit later on, the great theologian Origen (c. 184–255 CE) addressed the reason for Jesus' purification in the Temple after his birth (Luke 2:22), which raised questions similar to those about the baptism. Origen argued that when Christ became incarnate in the person of Jesus, he put on stained human flesh as a matter of course:

Did Jesus therefore need purification? Was he unclean, or polluted with some stain? Perhaps I seem to speak rashly; but the authority of Scripture prompts me to ask. See what is written in the book of Job: "No man is clean of stain, not even if his life had lasted but a single day" [Job 14:4–5]. The passage does not say, "No man is clean of sin," but, "No man is clean of stain." "Stain" and "sins" do not mean the same thing. "Stain" is one thing, "sin" another . . . Every soul that has been clothed with a human body has its own "stain." But Jesus was stained through his own will, because he had taken on a human body for our salvation.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Jerome, *Against Pelagius* 3.2.

<sup>30</sup> *Writings of Saint Justin Martyr*, ed. and trans. T.B. Falls (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press of America, 1948).

<sup>31</sup> Origen, *Homilies on Luke: Fragments on Luke*, ed. and trans. J. T. Lienhard (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), Homily 14.3–4, p. 57.

For Origen, the distinction between stain and sin is crucial. Human flesh, human bodies are stained with mortality, and so Jesus' own physical body was similarly stained. This did not mean Jesus had sinned in any way, but only that the purification referred to was a matter of ritual cleansing.<sup>32</sup>

The third century also saw a significant debate about whether or not lapsed Christians needed to be rebaptized after renouncing the faith during the persecution under the emperor Decius (ruled 249–251 CE). This issue became particularly conflicted in the North African city of Carthage, when Cyprian was bishop there.<sup>33</sup> In this context a writing falsely attributed to Cyprian (hence, Pseudo-Cyprian), *On Rebaptism*, makes reference to a lost apocryphal work entitled *The Preaching of Paul*, in which, Pseudo-Cyprian states, one will find “contrary to all Scriptures . . . both Christ confessing His own sin – although He alone did no sin at all – and almost compelled by His mother Mary unwillingly to receive John’s baptism.”<sup>34</sup> Of interest here is not so much the stance of Pseudo-Cyprian on the rebaptism controversy as the tradition (likely third-century) that states Jesus confessed his own sin and that Jesus’ mother Mary is the one who pushed Jesus to undergo John’s baptism, though for what reason remains unclear. Thus we see that, even a few centuries after the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, Christians were still sensitive to the problems associated with Jesus’ baptism by John, especially the association of repentance of sin with the baptism administered by John.

A little less than a century later Cyril of Jerusalem (c. 315–387 CE) argued that when Adam sinned he had lost the Spirit of God. The purpose for Jesus’ baptism was so that the Spirit of God would again come down upon humanity and that it would be restored to God’s people.<sup>35</sup> Jesus was not baptized for his own sins. He was baptized as the way to return God’s saving Spirit to humanity. In these various ways, then, the development of Christianity in the first several centuries saw significant reflection on the meaning of and reason for the baptism of Jesus. The one thing they all knew was that Jesus could not have been baptized for forgiveness of his

<sup>32</sup> Ephrem Syrus (c. 306–373 CE), the most prominent author in the fourth-century Syrian church, argued similarly to Origen, but in reference to Jesus’ baptism: “If Jesus had not put on the flesh, why did he approach baptism? . . . The divine nature has no need of baptism . . . but he put on the flesh . . . and he approached baptism in order to render testimony to his humanity.” *Commentary on the Diatessaron* 4.1. See McDonnell, *The Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan*, 23.

<sup>33</sup> See J. P. Burns, *Cyprian the Bishop* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 12–50.

<sup>34</sup> *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5, Appendix, “A Treatise on Re-Baptism by an Anonymous Writer,” para. 17 (p. 677).

<sup>35</sup> *The Divine Institutes* 4.15; see McDonnell, *The Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan*, 22.

own sin, because he came from God to suffer and die for humanity, and then to be vindicated by his resurrection from the dead. And so they came up with different reasons: to fulfill all righteousness, to bear witness to his identity as Son of God, to purify the baptismal waters that would initiate later Christians, to identify in solidarity with the sinful state of human flesh, to remove the stain of worldly existence, and to restore the Spirit to creation.<sup>36</sup>

#### BAPTISM BETWEEN HISTORY AND THEOLOGY

So far we have looked at the kinds of constructive and retrospective theologizing that went on in relation to the story of Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist. We are now in a position to ask not about the historical development of that theologizing but about the history underlying all of the theological reflection. We have already seen that the event that drove the extensive revisions in the baptism scene was not the baptism itself, but the retrojection of resurrection faith back on the baptism scene, as was also the case for the birth story of Jesus. What can be said, then, about the actual baptism of Jesus from a historical perspective? Is it even possible to make historical claims about the baptism of Jesus? In my view, all that historians can really reconstruct with any confidence is that Jesus submitted to John's baptism. Thus we can say that the event of Jesus' baptism took place *qua* event. The meaning of this event, however, is the real issue. Can we say with any degree of probability what this baptismal event meant historically for the various characters in the story – for Jesus, for John the Baptist, for others gathered to receive John's baptism? Can we say with any probability what the baptism event meant theologically for these various characters at the time? We know what the baptismal event came to mean well after the fact, but what about at the time of the event itself? Or do we even have enough information to render an opinion about historical probability?

When we consider the baptism of Jesus from the dual perspective of, on the one hand, reconstructing historical probabilities, and, on the other hand, with the constructive theologizing of the early Christians, we find ourselves positioned at the interface between the limits of historical knowledge and the budding potential of theological conviction. This interface between historical

<sup>36</sup> For a thorough analysis of baptism in early Christianity, see the magisterial work of E. Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).

reconstruction and theological construction has been the focus of many attempts to explain the baptism of Jesus by John. Perhaps a good way to capture this interface is to call them *construals*. The following construals by no means exhaust the possibilities, but they strike me as primary options, fundamental poles, that are well represented by historical and theological reflection on the baptism event.

### *Construal #1: Jesus the Penitent*

One approach to the baptism of Jesus has been the understanding that Jesus was a repentant sinner like the other penitents who came to John for baptism. We have already seen the embarrassment of the Gospel writers at this potential implication in the baptism of Jesus by John. We have also seen how they defended against precisely this reading of the story. In the post-Enlightenment world of biblical scholarship, however, there have been various challenges to the theological vision of the baptism presented in the Gospels and passed on in the tradition of official church teaching. The goal of such scholarship has been, in part, to separate the mythic overlay that the church had superimposed on Jesus as the postresurrection Christ from the historic man who was the pre-Easter Jesus of Nazareth. Among the earliest and most profound efforts in this direction was the construal offered by David Friedrich Strauss (1808–1874) in his landmark 1835 *Leben Jesu* (*Life of Jesus*).<sup>37</sup> The book caused quite a sensation as Strauss argued that most of the stories in the Gospels were mythic and should be taken not as reporting literal historical events but as reflections of later theological convictions.<sup>38</sup> Thus the miraculous birth of Jesus was told to honor Jesus long after the fact; it was mythic in scope and not meant to be understood literally. The baptism fit the same mold, according to Strauss. Regarding Jesus' baptism, Strauss concluded:

There is then no alternative but to suppose, that as Jesus had not, up to the time of his baptism, thought of himself as the Messiah, so with regard to the *metanoia* (repentance), he may have justly ranked himself amongst the

<sup>37</sup> Strauss's book was translated into English in 1846. See E. Lawler, *David Friedrich Strauss and His Critics: The Life of Jesus Debate in Early Nineteenth-Century German Journals* (New York: Peter Lang, 1986).

<sup>38</sup> As A. Schweitzer memorably commented on the response to the publication of Strauss' *Leben Jesu*, "Scarcely ever has a book let loose such a storm of controversy; and scarcely ever has a controversy been so barren of immediate result. The fertilizing rain brought up only a crop of toadstools." Schweitzer, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1961; originally published in 1906), 91.



most excellent in Israel, without excluding himself from what is predicated in Job iv.18, xv.15. There is little historical ground for controverting this.<sup>39</sup>

This is Strauss' somewhat indirect way of stating what in 1835 was scandalous in the extreme – that the baptism of Jesus was in fact for repentance. Jesus did not think of himself as the messiah. And even if Jesus had a healthy ego, he did not consider himself free from sin or free from the need for John's baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin.

Much more recently, Paul Hollenbach has written about "The Conversion of Jesus" in relationship to his baptism by John.<sup>40</sup> Hollenbach refers quite plainly to "Jesus the Penitent."<sup>41</sup> He puts the matter rather directly: "we assume not only that Jesus repented at his baptism, but also that John's message made sense to him, that he believed that John's message applied to him."<sup>42</sup> Of what did Jesus repent? Hollenbach concedes that we are very much in the dark at this point. He conjectures, somewhat weakly, that Jesus discovered that he had been involved in the oppression of weak members of the society and that he had done so in his capacity as a middle-class carpenter. In Hollenbach's view Jesus was "a substantial member of society" who came to feel a general concern for the daily injustices he saw, injustices against which John the Baptist railed.<sup>43</sup>

Although Hollenbach's interpretation of the baptismal event is possible, his portrayal of Jesus as a powerful member of society, especially as a carpenter, is not in keeping with what we know of day laborers in Galilee.<sup>44</sup> Still, he makes a valid point in stating that "there are no historical, but only theological reasons for refusing to look at Jesus' baptism in the manner described."<sup>45</sup> The difficulty is in determining what counts as the best historical explanation for the motivation behind Jesus' desire to be baptized by John. The danger of trying to read Jesus' mind from the distance of 2,000 years, and thus psychologizing him in a rather anachronistic manner, is an

<sup>39</sup> The passage from Job 4:18 reads, "Even in his servants he puts no trust, and his angels he charges with error," and Job 15:15 reads, "God puts no trust even in his holy ones, and the heavens are not clean in his sight." Strauss' appeal to these texts indicates that he viewed Jesus as seeing himself as one sinful human among others.

<sup>40</sup> "The Conversion of Jesus: From Jesus the Baptizer to Jesus the Healer," in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt. Geschichte und Kultur Roms im Spiegel der neueren Forschung*, Principat 11.25.1 Religion (Judentum), H. Temporini and W. Haase, eds. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1982), 196–220.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 198. <sup>42</sup> Ibid., 199. <sup>43</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>44</sup> See, e.g., J.D. Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSan-Francisco, 1994), who characterizes Jesus' artisan class as occupying "the dangerous space between Peasants and Degraded or Expendables" (25).

<sup>45</sup> "The Conversion of Jesus," 201.

important concern in any historical reconstruction. But again, Hollenbach points correctly to a questionable assumption that lies behind the theological conviction regarding Jesus' sinlessness, namely, that Jesus did not mature, "change, grow, or develop in his thought and strategy in response either to inner psychological or outer environmental factors."<sup>46</sup>

Along the same lines as Hollenbach, though certainly from a different perspective, Bruce Chilton offers a similarly unlikely scenario that depends on a heavy dose of psychological analysis of Jesus from afar. As we saw in the previous chapter on the birth of Jesus, Chilton argues that Jesus was considered a *mamzer* and that this stigma followed Jesus as a shameful label all his life. Chilton offers a romantic vision of Jesus leaving his family as a teenager in search of a father figure. When Jesus encountered John the Baptist, "something loosened in him. He was at last able to express his emotional connection with Israel to a mature, recognized teacher."<sup>47</sup> The baptism proper was indeed for repentance of sins:

Jesus stood on the same ground as everyone else. The hurt inflicted during his childhood, the sense that he was an outcast, in the wrong through no fault of his own, was healed through his repeated immersions. The Jordan's waters washed away his feeling of estrangement. He repented of the anger he had felt, of his resentment against his own people in Nazareth. He knew he was released from sin in John's baptism.<sup>48</sup>

How Chilton knows any of this, of course, makes his speculation all the more speculative. Is it possible? Yes. Is it likely? No. Given my earlier critique of the *mamzer* tradition on which Chilton relies so heavily, the highly romanticized vision of Jesus' baptism is likewise questionable in the extreme. If the *mamzer* charge related to Jesus' birth does not hold, then what Chilton wants to build on top of it in relation to the baptism is even more precarious.

Following a train of thought related to Chilton's are the arguments of pastoral theologians and pastoral psychologists who suggest that Jesus had a longing for adoption by a father. Andries van Aarde, for example, argues that the social-scientific model of the "status-envy hypothesis" explains much about the persona of Jesus and his identification of God as "Abba" (father).<sup>49</sup> As van Aarde explains, "to become an *adult* who wishes to have a *father*, a person, according to the status envy hypothesis, would be deprived

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 202. See Meier's critique of Hollenbach, *A Marginal Jew*, 124–127.

<sup>47</sup> *Rabbi Jesus*, 42. <sup>48</sup> Ibid., 48–49.

<sup>49</sup> "Social Identity, Status Envy and Jesus' *Abba*," *Pastoral Psychology* 45:6 (1997): 451–472. D. Capps is in substantial agreement with van Aarde; *Jesus: A Psychological Biography*

of the privilege of having a father during infancy.”<sup>50</sup> The very status of not having a father, in this view, would have made Jesus an outcast and a sinner in need of remission of sin outside the structures of the Jerusalem Temple, a forgiveness provided by John’s baptism.<sup>51</sup>

Each of these approaches essentially builds on the problems arising from the irregular birth of Jesus.<sup>52</sup> The scandal of Jesus’ birth was carried through to his eventual baptism by John, through which Jesus was cleansed of both his own sin and the sin associated with his birth. In this process Jesus also came to experience God as father, *abba*, in a radical manner. While Joachim Jeremias, followed by many, viewed this *abba* relationship between Jesus and God as unique in early Judaism, the last generation of scholarship has conclusively demonstrated that such language was not unique and that early Christian usage of *abba* more likely goes back to the early church than to Jesus himself.<sup>53</sup> This approach to Jesus as a self-conscious penitent is certainly the most speculative when it comes to historical reconstruction, as we really have no access to what Jesus thought was going on in his baptism by John. At best we can say that others may have perceived Jesus to be one penitent among others. And from the baptism accounts that we have, Jesus said nothing that would dissuade one from drawing such a conclusion.

### *Construal #2: Jesus the Anointed*

A far more common explanation of the baptism of Jesus is basically in keeping with the Gospel portraits. In this view the baptism of Jesus was not for repentance and forgiveness of sins but served as the inauguration of Jesus’ public ministry, his anointing by the Spirit of God. A strong defender of this view is N.T. Wright. In his *Jesus and the Victory of God* Wright argues that the baptism of Jesus by John functioned as a “call” narrative underlying

(St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000), 147–154. Similarly, D. Jacobs-Malina, *Beyond Patriarchy: The Images of Family in Jesus* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 2.

<sup>50</sup> “Social Identity, Status Envy and Jesus’ *Abba*,” 456–457. <sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 464.

<sup>52</sup> D. Strauss viewed Joseph as the natural father of Jesus (*The Life of Jesus*, 133).

<sup>53</sup> The secondary literature here is significant. See Jeremias’ arguments in *The Prayers of Jesus*, trans. J. Bowden (Naperville, IL: Allenson, 1967), 11–65, and “*Abba* as an Address to God,” in his *New Testament Theology: The Proclamation of Jesus* (New York: Scribner’s, 1971), 62–68. In response, see especially M.R. D’Angelo, “*Abba* and ‘Father’: Imperial Theology and the Jesus Traditions,” *JBL* 111:4 (1992): 611–630, and M.R. D’Angelo, “Theology in Mark and Q: *Abba* and ‘Father’ in Context,” *HTR* 85:2 (1992): 149–174. On the reliance of scholars on the work of Jeremias, see E.P. Sanders, “Defending the Indefensible,” *JBL* 110:3 (1991): 463–477. Sanders’ article is a sharp rejoinder to B. Meyer’s “A Caricature of Joachim Jeremias and His Scholarly Work,” *JBL* 110:3 (1991): 451–462. Finally, see J. Barr’s critique of Jeremias’ linguistic arguments in “*Abba* Isn’t Daddy,” *JTS* 39 (1988): 28–47.

Jesus' ministry, a divine call not unlike that received by the prophets of ancient Israel who were empowered by God's Spirit to proclaim God's message in word and deed. On the basis of the baptism, Wright states, "we may, without attempting to enter into details, suggest that it was at this moment that Jesus received either the call to act as Israel's Messiah, or, supposing he had already been aware of such a call, confirmation of this vocation."<sup>54</sup> While Wright may be correct in this interpretation of Jesus' baptism, it is the case that, as the saying goes, the devil is precisely in the details. Wright continues by arguing that however much the account of the baptism may have been influenced by the post-Easter faith of Christians, still "there is no reason historically to deny that at John's baptism Jesus became aware in a new way of a messianic vocation."<sup>55</sup> But neither is there any good reason historically to affirm a clear link between baptism and a messianic vocation. For all we know, the baptism of Jesus confirmed him as a disciple of John the Baptist for some period of time, only after which his own sense of vocation (whatever that was) began to emerge more clearly. Wright's confident assertion does not substitute for substantive argument.

More guarded in what he thinks we can know of Jesus' self-consciousness in relation to the baptism is James Dunn. From his *Jesus and the Spirit* (1975) to his *Jesus Remembered* (2003) Dunn has maintained a cautious affirmation that the baptism of Jesus is best viewed as the anointing of Jesus, inaugurating his public ministry. In his view the baptismal theophany allows us to see something of Jesus' personal experience. For Dunn the notion of God as a loving Father and the reception of God's Spirit provided the ground for Jesus' ministry, which can be traced to the baptism. The baptism shows that "Jesus underwent a significant experience – significant in terms of his consciousness of sonship and Spirit."<sup>56</sup> According to Dunn, it is most probable that Jesus viewed himself in precisely the same terms as his later followers affirmed in their narratives about his baptism: "Jesus himself probably claimed to have been anointed with the Spirit (Isa. 61:1), and thought of his relationship to God as son to father."<sup>57</sup>

More cautious still is John Meier in his *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (vol. 2: *Mentor, Message, and Miracles*). Meier devotes more than two hundred pages to Jesus with and without John the Baptist, leaving no stone unturned. For all of his solid research, however (and it is solid), his conclusions about the meaning of Jesus' baptism are somewhat meager.

<sup>54</sup> *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 537.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 537. <sup>56</sup> *Jesus and the Spirit* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 63.

<sup>57</sup> *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 376.

Indeed, for Meier there really is no other way to discuss the meaning of Jesus' baptism apart from tentative conclusions. A few things can be said with some probability: (1) Jesus knew and agreed with the eschatological message of John; (2) in getting baptized Jesus was accepting a charismatic ritual apart from the authority of the Temple cult, a once-for-all ritual administered by John that was an entrance rite necessary for true salvation; and (3) accepting John's baptism meant in some way identifying with a baptism of repentance for forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4), though this notion had a more collective understanding in early Judaism than the highly personalized conception of repentance in modern Christian piety. The data we have from the Gospels simply do not allow anything further to be said with confidence. The baptism was clearly a watershed event and involved a fundamental change in the life of Jesus. He apparently ceased his trade of woodworking, left his family associations, and at least for a time aligned himself with John the Baptist and his disciples, after which he began his own itinerant ministry and calling of disciples.<sup>58</sup>

Having outlined these fundamental contours regarding Jesus' baptism by John, Meier concludes that historically one is constrained by the evidence to acknowledge various possibilities, but in the end he arrives at the following modest conclusion:

Jesus acknowledged John's charismatic authority as an eschatological prophet, accepted his message of imminent fiery judgment on a sinful Israel, submitted to his baptism as a seal of his resolve to change his life and as a pledge of salvation as part of a purified Israel, on whom God . . . would pour out the holy spirit on the last day.<sup>59</sup>

The sources at hand do not allow more to be said, in Meier's view, because the Gospel accounts really served as Christian *midrash* (interpretation and commentary) on the baptismal event proper, *midrash* incorporating a variety of biblical texts to present the Gospel reader with an initial interpretation of Jesus' identity as the anointed Son of God. It is thus nearly impossible to factor out the fusion that has occurred between the event and its later Christian interpretation.<sup>60</sup>

Although Meier is reluctant on methodological grounds to rule out completely a Jesus who confesses personal sin, nonetheless he has presented the evidence in such a way that confession of sin in early Judaism was more a communal than individual affair. And when it comes to the reason Jesus gets baptized by John, Meier refers to it as a "seal of [Jesus']

<sup>58</sup> *A Marginal Jew*, 106–116.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

resolve to change his life,” which raises the question of what constitutes this seal or change. It appears to run far short of repentance and locates Jesus more as one who casts his fate with the proclamation of John the Baptist. Thus, on the sliding scale between penitence and anointing, Meier aligns Jesus’ baptism far more closely to anointing.

### CONSTRUING CONSTRUCTS

There is certainly a continuum between these two construals of Jesus as penitent and Jesus as anointed. It is precisely between these two approaches that we see the difficulty of the interface between history and theology. Some scholars seek to strip later theologizing from the historical event narrated in the baptism of Jesus. Here the goal is to uncover the full humanity of Jesus without later theological overlay. At the same time, some scholars seek to integrate historical narrative with theological reflection, much as the Gospel writers did, to present for the community of faith a deeper understanding of Jesus’ full humanity in light of the larger theological narrative that underscores his life, death, and resurrection. The first approach sacrifices theology on the altar of history; the second approach sacrifices history on the altar of theology. And such is ever the dilemma facing historians dealing with fundamentally theological texts, and theologians dealing with texts that purport to narrate some form of history. In the case of Jesus, historians do not need theology, although they have no choice but to interact with theological texts. And theologians seeking to engage in historical reconstruction need to do so in ways not undermined by theological convictions, even though they would not be engaging in the task if they did not believe it in some way served to deepen the faith. The result is an uneasy effort at bringing historical reconstruction to bear on theological construction.

But historians change their minds. Historians read evidence differently in different times. They are constantly engaged in the process of revision, even when basic understandings do not necessarily change dramatically. Contextual frameworks change and develop. Theoretical underpinnings and the arguments behind them evolve, with old approaches abandoned and newer approaches trotted out. Similarly, theologians change their minds in light of present realities – all the while trying to present a front of continuity because, after all, they are addressing the interplay between an eternal God and temporal creation. In the case of neither the historian nor the theologian (nor both in the same person) is it simply a matter of flux and change. Periods of stability in approach (both historical and theological) do occur, sometimes for longer and sometimes for shorter periods of time.

So when we approach construals of the baptism story in light of these concerns, where does it leave us? It leaves us somewhere between history and theology. Attempts to strip later theological overlays from the underlying historical events inevitably lead to a lower Christology that emphasizes the human identity of Jesus, foibles and all. Attempts to use the underlying historical events as springboards for theological reflection inevitably lead to a higher Christology that emphasizes the divine identity of Jesus, glory and all. One is tempted to cut the difference and try to eke out an interpretation of Jesus, a Christology that neither bleeds excessively nor glows in the dark. The temptation is to go for the middle ground and let the historical and theological truth of the matter settle in some neutral or safe medium territory. But truth is seldom middling. It has edges, often sharp edges that are not particularly safe at all.

So what should we say about the baptism of Jesus? In my view I see little alternative but to see the history and theology of Jesus' baptism as parallel tracks that resist any kind of easy integration. On a historical level I would argue that it is beyond any serious dispute that in submitting to a baptism by John, Jesus was submitting to a baptism of repentance for forgiveness of sin, the Gospel post-Easter protestations notwithstanding. Yes, a very human Jesus. Why would any onlooker imagine anything else? Why would Jesus imagine anything else? Why would John the Baptist imagine anything else? Jesus had no mark on his forehead letting John know that "this is the one," even though Matthew's version of the story (and countless Jesus movies) would suggest such knowledge on John's part. The baptism of Jesus took on a different hue only in light of later theological reflection on the cross and belief in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. On the historical level, then, Jesus was indeed a penitent who identified with John's preaching of renewal. Through baptism Jesus joined this renewal movement and eventually launched his own.

On a theological level, despite centuries of Jesus being hidden away in the ecclesial protection program, defending him from having a humanity that knows personal sin, shame, and guilt, I would also argue (and precisely as a theologian) that Jesus was a penitent who identified with John's preaching of renewal. Yes, these parallel tracks of history and theology resist any easy integration. But the tracks do cross back and forth, and perhaps they move in the same direction more frequently than either historian or theologian would find comfortable. Jesus a penitent? Why not? Jesus experiencing the full range of human existence and emotion? Why not? Jesus actually being a real human being and not a divine or semi-divine marionette? Why not? Too often the Jesus of theology is more of a Pinocchio Jesus, a wooden toy

produced in an ecclesial workshop that dances to our sense of what a perfect human being should look like, as if we knew what that was. And this Pinocchio Jesus never has a long nose from moral failure. But, I would argue, Jesus in fact was a real boy, not a divine infancy gospel caricature. He was a real person in real relationships. And real relationships are messy at best. They are not particularly sanitary or pure. They get cleaned up after the fact, but midstream they are complicated and not so neat. They are enmeshed in the drama of real life, complete with disappointment, hope, betrayal, trust, love, anger, resentment, grace, and forgiveness. If Jesus was truly human, then he participated in real human life with all of its mess; with all of its compromises, hurts, and guilt; with all of its missed opportunities, missed marks, and sin. We should recognize the construction projects and fences built around Jesus for what they are: efforts at protecting a divine Jesus from being too human (fully human) after all. If rabbinic Judaism advocated “building a fence around the law” as a hermeneutic principle (Mishnah, Tractate *Pirke Aboth* [*Sayings of the Fathers*] 1.1), then formative Christianity engaged in building a fence around Jesus. The scaffolding stands there to this day, encased in centuries of conciliar concrete.

What are the implications of this understanding of Jesus and his baptism for Christian theology? I am not exactly sure. Christian theology is so full of mystery and contradictions (or “tensions”) that I am not sure why it cannot bear to have a fully human Jesus who is not sinless. It is one thing to *understand* why he was cast as sinless in the first place, but it is another thing to continue to affirm this theological conviction for the sake of tradition and Trinitarian orthodoxy. The difficulty is that we are very uneasy with a messy Christology, even though that is largely what we find in comparing and contrasting the writings of the New Testament. We want a Christology where all the parts fit together nicely, a way of understanding Jesus that pretends we actually know what the picture on the outside of the puzzle box looks like. We do not want to admit, to borrow a few Pauline sayings, that we are working out salvation with fear and trembling, seeing as though through a glass darkly, and being changed from one degree of glory to another, perhaps with a step back now and again. If God is not offended by a Jesus who suffers and dies on a cross, why do we think God would flinch at a real flesh-and-blood incarnation, warts and all – all part of the crippling particularity of human existence and self-emptying? If, as Christians believe, in Christ God has chosen to take human form, then why can it not be really and truly human form in all of its weakness and struggle to discern the leading of God’s Spirit? Which is more of an offense, an incarnate messiah who wears the same



clothes as everyone else, or an incarnate messiah who wears a divine protective suit so as not to get too dirty (or dirty at all)?

And so, I would argue, in the baptism of Jesus history and theology can meet and agree on a man who was attracted by the message of one John the Baptist. Renewal, reform, recommitment to the God of Israel. Repentance, forgiveness, and regeneration at the proclamation of God's impending kingdom. Anointed and empowered to join and lead and embody this proclamation. The scandalous death of Jesus on the cross, and the even more surprising belief that God raised him from the dead, of course, changed everything after the fact. That is why a penitent Jesus became the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. That is why a Jesus subordinate to John became greater than John. But all things in due course. For between the baptism and the cross stands the public ministry of Jesus in all of its scandalous faithfulness and its mischievous fidelity to the God of Israel. To this ministry we now turn, with a brief stop at the temptation story along the way.

## A Tempting Transition

**I**N MOVING FROM THE BAPTISM OF JESUS TO HIS MINISTRY proper we shift from a pivotal moment to a much larger period of time stretching from the story of Jesus' temptation immediately after his baptism to the end of his ministry in Jerusalem. Although his baptism and association with John served as the springboard for Jesus' public ministry, this ministry is the locus for the most significant expressions of Jesus' sinful or perfectly obedient teachings and actions. Sin and obedience, to be sure, are in the eye of the beholder. Was Jesus a prophet from God who was challenging God's people to a renewed understanding of faith? Or was Jesus a false prophet, a dangerous charismatic figure who was leading the people astray? We find both perceptions of Jesus at work in the source materials that relate the substance of his ministry in word and deed.

To examine the many stories and sayings from Jesus' public ministry in terms of sin and perfection I will employ three larger rubrics in the following chapters: the scandal of family, the scandal of friends, and the scandal of faith. There is nothing sacred about these three categories; they simply strike me as helpful overarching motifs for organizing a sustained focus on aspects of Jesus' ministry that proved most controversial during his ministry, motifs that were also quite formative for early Christian identity. Before turning to these three issues of family, friends, and faith, however, it is important for us to examine the story that provides the transition between Jesus' baptism and the beginning of his public ministry, namely, the story of his temptation in the wilderness.

### SIN AND TEMPTATION

The temptation stories (Matt. 4:1–11; Mark 1:12–13; Luke 4:1–13) confirm the power of God's Spirit that has come upon Jesus in the baptism, in that he

does not succumb to temptation. Ironically, it is the Spirit of God itself that leads Jesus out into the wilderness, into the desert, the habitation of the demonic, precisely in order to be put to the test. The Spirit of God thus leads Jesus into temptation (contrary to the petition in the Lord's Prayer), not really to see if Jesus will prove faithful, for that is a foregone conclusion, but to demonstrate that Jesus truly is both faithful and empowered by God's Spirit. This testing and tempting will only serve to make him stronger for the ministry that lies ahead.

The temptation story appears in all three of the Synoptic Gospels, but not in the Gospel of John.<sup>1</sup> Within Matthew, Mark, and Luke we have two versions of the story – a very brief version in Mark (1:12–13) and a much more extended version from the Q tradition used by both Matthew (4:1–11) and Luke (4:1–13). In all three cases the temptation story follows immediately on the story of Jesus' baptism, almost as a kind of proof that the baptism of Jesus and his reception of the Spirit had indeed been efficacious in his own life in warding off sin, which in turn would lead to the empowering of his followers to receive the same Spirit and claim the same victory over sin and temptation in this life, in anticipation of the kingdom and life to come.

In the Gospel of Mark the temptation story receives scant attention, summarized as briefly as the baptism story: "And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him" (Mark 1:12–13). The language of wilderness and forty days calls to mind the image of Israel wandering in the wilderness for forty years of testing.<sup>2</sup> But the reference to forty days also reminds us of the story of Elijah being in the wilderness for forty days and being cared for by an angel (1 Kings 19:7–8), as well as the forty days and nights that Moses spent on Mt. Sinai (Exod. 24:18). Significantly, both Elijah and Moses will appear together later on a mountaintop bearing witness to a transfigured Jesus (Mark 9). The reference to wild animals, found only in Mark's version of the temptation story, reminds us of Psalm 91, where the one who is faithful will benefit from God's protection:

<sup>1</sup> The Epistle to the Hebrews also makes significant reference to Jesus having been tempted and tested in every respect, yet without sin (4:15). Hebrews also develops the notion that Jesus learned obedience and was perfected through his great suffering (2:10–18; 5:7–9; 7:26–28; 9:12–14).

<sup>2</sup> See S. Garrett, *The Temptations of Jesus in Mark's Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996) 55–61; H.A. Kelly, "The Devil in the Desert," *CBQ* 26 (1964): 190–220; and B. Gerhardsson, *The Testing of God's Son* (Lund: Gleerup, 1966), 41–43.

For he will command his angels concerning you  
to guard you in all your ways . . .  
You will tread on the lion and the adder,  
the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot. (Ps. 91:11–13)

The combination of guardian angels and wild beasts (lions and snakes) in this Psalm make it clear that Mark is again drawing significantly on the Jewish scriptures as he introduces Jesus and situates his ministry squarely within the traditions of Israel.<sup>3</sup> As we have already seen, Mark began by appealing to Isaiah in grounding John the Baptist, then used Psalm 2 and Isaiah 42 in the short baptism scene. And now echoes of Psalm 91 appear in the equally brief story of the temptation. The wild beasts seem to be aligned with Satan in this passage as representing the dangers that Jesus must overcome in the temptations he faces.<sup>4</sup> Mark never states explicitly what the temptations are, but it is enough that Jesus faces them and apparently comes through unscathed.

The story of the temptation of Jesus from the Q tradition that is found in both Matthew and Luke is much more extensive. In general, the temptations are for Jesus to demonstrate his divine power in satisfying his own desires (hunger, power, and testing God) rather than using his power on behalf of others who are hungry, powerless, and struggling with God. In both accounts there are strong appeals to scripture on the lips of Jesus, and not a few in the mouth of Satan. In both accounts the emphasis on the identity of Jesus as the Son of God continues to be prominent. The repeated refrain of Satan, “if you are the Son of God” (Matt. 4:3, 6; Luke 4:3, 9) has a strong connection to the pronouncement by God during the baptism scene that Jesus is indeed God’s son. The temptation scene offers Jesus a chance to prove his identity.

In Matthew’s Gospel this emphasis on the divine sonship of Jesus will find important expression again during the crucifixion of Jesus, where those who are mocking Jesus say, “If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross” (Matt. 27:40), which parallels the temptation to “throw yourself

<sup>3</sup> See J. Marcus, *Mark 1–8* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 167–171. See also J. Marcus, *The Way of the Lord: Christological Exegesis of the Old Testament in the Gospel of Mark* (New York: T. & T. Clark International, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> See John Paul Heil, “Jesus with the Wild Animals in Mark 1:13,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 68 (2006): 63–78; A. Y. Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2007), 151–153; S. Garrett, *The Demise of the Devil: Magic and the Demonic in Luke’s Writings* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1989), 139. Contra Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 168. See the parallel in the *Testament of Naphtali* 8:4, “The devil will flee from you; wild animals will be afraid of you, and the angels will stand by you.”

down” to prove Jesus’ status as Son of God (Matt. 4:6). Only Matthew adds “and forty nights” to the “forty days” referred to by both Mark and Luke. The language of “forty days and forty nights” parallels directly the story of Moses going without food or drink for “forty days and forty nights” while he was on Mount Sinai (Exod. 34:28). This motif ties in with the other passages in Matthew that develop a Moses typology, especially in Matthew’s birth story and the Sermon on the Mount.

The progression of the dialogue between Satan and Jesus is remarkable in many ways. The first temptation, that Jesus should change stones into bread to alleviate his hunger after fasting for forty days and nights, shows a seemingly compassionate Satan who merely encourages Jesus to meet his physical needs. Would not Jesus later multiply loaves and fishes, and in John change water into wine? Why not change a stone into a little pumpernickel or rye? The response of Jesus shows, however, that the issue is not his hunger but his trust that God would provide all his needs. And so Jesus quotes a passage of scripture from Deuteronomy 8:3 in response: “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” Just as Israel learned to depend on God for manna during their wilderness sojourn, so Jesus would depend on God and not doubt that God would care for him.<sup>5</sup>

The second temptation shows that Satan has learned that he too needs to appeal to Scripture if he is going to have a chance of convincing Jesus to accept one of the temptations. He whisks Jesus off to the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem and encourages Jesus to let himself fall so that God would save him, and in so doing prove that he was the Son of God. Satan backs up his challenge with selected scriptural proof texts from Psalm 91:11–12: “‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone’” (Matt. 4:6). The choice of proof texts fits well with Jesus’ previous defense from Deuteronomy 8. Jesus will not doubt in God’s care and provision for him. If that is the case, suggests Satan, then why not really show your trust in God’s care by simply throwing yourself (literally) into his arms? But Jesus responds with another proof text from Deuteronomy, this time from 6:16, where the context is reminding Israel that God had delivered them from slavery in Egypt. Jesus states: “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the

<sup>5</sup> See J.T. Fitzgerald, “The Temptation of Jesus: The Testing of the Messiah in Matthew,” *RestQ* 15 (1972): 152–160.

test” (Matt. 4:7). Jesus does not need to prove anything or to test God, because he already trusts God.

The third and final temptation of Satan lacks the subtlety of the second temptation. There is no appeal to scripture or pretense of concern for Jesus’ physical well-being (as in the first temptation). This time it is a raw appeal to the human desire for power. Satan takes Jesus to a high mountain, from which they can survey all the kingdoms of the world. Satan puts it to Jesus directly: “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me” (Matt. 4:9). The first two temptations had also invoked a conditional reality – “if you are the Son of God” – but this time the condition is not about the identity of Jesus but about a base desire for power. If Jesus will but fall down and worship Satan, then Jesus can rule the world under Satan’s dominion. But again Jesus appeals to the Scriptures, and this time to the fundamental commandment God gave to Moses. Reciting from Deuteronomy 6:13, Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him’” (Matt. 4:10). Satan had taken him upon a high mountain overlooking the world. But Jesus appealed to another mountain, Sinai, where Moses had received the law from God. It is significant that even before responding with the quotation from Deuteronomy 6:13 Jesus had already said “Away with you Satan!” (4:10). The scriptural citation is merely a further proof text for Jesus’ prior conviction. Jesus would not doubt God; he would not test God; he would not seek his own power apart from God. If the baptism confirmed that the birth of Jesus was a result of the Spirit of God, then the temptation story confirmed that the baptism with the Spirit of God was very real and that it would see him through his ministry. Satan had not succeeded; Satan would not defeat him, and nor would any other power. The temptation story prepares Jesus and the reader for a triumphant ministry that would paradoxically find its ultimate victory in the cross and subsequent resurrection.

The Gospel of Luke makes many of the same points through his version of the Q temptation story as we saw in Matthew, but with a few changes. The most commonly noticed change can be found in Luke’s reordering of the sequence of the temptations.<sup>6</sup> Whereas in Matthew the order had been: (1) stones to bread, (2) throwing himself down from the Temple, and (3) worship Satan in exchange for world dominion, in Luke the final two temptations have been reversed. Most scholars view this shift as part of Luke’s conforming his story to make the Temple in Jerusalem occupy the

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., J. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I–IX* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), 506–520.

climactic scene in his development of Luke–Acts overall. By placing the temptation from the Temple heights in the final position, Luke highlights the Jerusalem Temple, just as he does by having the disciples rejoicing at Jesus’ resurrection in Jerusalem and not in Galilee (as in Mark and Matthew). Jerusalem will be the starting point for the mission of the apostles in Acts, and so Luke needs to keep things centered around Jerusalem and the Temple.

Three other features stand out in Luke’s account of the temptation story. First, Luke stresses at the outset of the story that Jesus was “full of the Holy Spirit” (4:1), an observation not made in either Mark or Matthew. This emphasis is repeated again immediately after the story, as we are told in Luke 4:14 that Jesus was “filled with the power of the Spirit.” The summary statement will, in turn, lead directly to Jesus’ inaugural sermon in Nazareth, where Jesus will cite a passage from Isaiah 61 stressing that “the Spirit of the Lord is upon me” (Isa. 61:1; Luke 4:18). Second, beyond the strong emphasis on the Spirit of God as the central power animating Jesus’ ministry, Luke also adds another important editorial comment to the temptation narrative. In 4:13, just after Jesus has refuted Satan for the third time, Luke alone tells us, “When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.” That opportune time will occur in Luke 22:3, where – in anticipation of the Passover meal Jesus will share with his disciples – only Luke tells us, “Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was one of the twelve.” Judas confers with the Jewish authorities and agrees to betray Jesus into their hands. Third, whereas both Mark and Matthew have angels come and minister to Jesus after the temptations, in Luke’s account there are no ministering angels attending to Jesus. Apparently Luke’s Jesus is so strong that he needs no special care.<sup>7</sup> This is in keeping with Luke’s general downplaying of Jesus’ suffering, for example, in Gethsemane or on the cross.

The Q version of the temptation story, as edited by Matthew and Luke, plays an important role in casting Jesus as God’s sinless anointed one who, empowered by God’s Spirit, not only survives the tests posed by Satan but does so handily. The Hebrews had not been faithful to God in the aftermath of the Exodus from Egypt, but gave way to idolatry by worshipping the golden calf (Exod. 32) even after they had been led on dry land through the Red Sea. By contrast, Jesus had been faithful to God in the aftermath of

<sup>7</sup> See J. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 190–196; Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I–IX*, 506–518. There is also a clear parallel in the addition of ministering angels to the Gethsemane account in Luke’s version, where a variant text states: “Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength” (Luke 23:43).

his baptism in the Jordan River. The forty years in the wilderness was God's punishment on the Hebrews, a way of purifying them before they entered into the promised land, but the forty days of temptation in the wilderness showed Jesus to be the undefiled pure and faithful Son of God. Jesus is God's obedient son, who knows God's law and keeps it. Jesus is God's Spirited son, who flexes his spiritual muscles in this initial contest with Satan. Though Satan will be back through various demon-possessed individuals throughout Jesus' ministry, and then with a real vengeance leading up to Jesus' crucifixion, Jesus remains God's obedient son guided by the Spirit. He is, as the book of Hebrews put it in classic form, "one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15). This front-loading of a Jesus who is already spiritually battle-tested projects a Jesus in the Gospels who will prevail through many conflicts. The placement of the temptation story between the baptism and the beginning of Jesus' public ministry is another good example of the kind of retrospective theologizing that characterizes the Gospels' portrayal of Jesus. He has already won *in nuce* even before he has begun. The believer and the reader have clear reason to be utterly confident that the obedient Spirit-filled Son of God will usher in the kingdom of God he is about to announce (Mark 1:15; Matt. 4:17; Luke 4:16–30).

#### TO DREAM THE IMPECCABLE DREAM ...

One of the more unusual aspects of the temptation story of Jesus in retrospect is a question that has troubled many through the history of Christian theology. Simply put, does the temptation story of Jesus suggest that it was possible or conceivable that Jesus *could*, in fact, have sinned?<sup>8</sup> Could he have actually chosen to give in to one of Satan's snares? The issue has to do with Jesus' *peccability*, his capacity to sin (coming from the Latin root *peccare*, to sin). This is one of the troubling little conundrums of having to deal with the two natures of Christ – fully human, fully God. If Jesus was fully human, then the answer must be "Yes, as a human being Jesus *could have sinned*, but he willed not to, and so was perfectly obedient." But if Jesus was (and, more to the point, still is) fully God, then the answer must be "No, for how could God sin?" – even potentially? So when we meld these together, there is a slight problem. Although neither as human nor God *did* Jesus sin,

<sup>8</sup> See the discussion in J. E. McKinley, *Tempted for Us: Theological Models and the Practical Relevance of Christ's Impeccability and Temptation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock/Paternoster, 2009).



according to Christian tradition, the question remains – *could* the human Jesus have *chosen* to sin? Could he have chosen to give in to temptation? True to form, however, Christian tradition has typically safeguarded the divinity of Jesus by sacrificing a few ounces of his humanity. Thus, the classic formula that has developed parrots Hebrews 4:15, that Jesus was *tempted* in every way as humans are tempted, but without sin. The emphasis, then, is on Jesus' experience of temptation, *as if* he could have sinned, even though he could not have sinned. If this sounds like an unsatisfactory answer, it is only because it is. It may be a necessary answer to perform the proper calculus of the mystery of the two natures of Christ (and preserve his divinity), but an unsatisfactory answer it remains.

The difficulty is clear. *Why* was Jesus driven out into the wilderness to face temptation and testing from Satan in the first place if there was no real possibility that Jesus would fail, as humans do? Was it a *pro forma* event to put Jesus' flesh, if not Spirit, to the test? Was Jesus a divine automaton going through the motions of a temptation? And if so, why does he need the ministering of angels at the end of the ordeal? More difficult still is the prospect that Jesus *could* have sinned. Does this suggest that human salvation in Christ rested on Jesus' human obedience to the divine will? If God was in Jesus, and Jesus could have sinned, does this mean that Jesus could have frustrated God's salvific plans? What would it mean for God to sin against God's self? The real problem, in my view, is not with whether or not Jesus could have sinned. The real problem rests with working out all the theological math to ensure that Jesus was tested and tempted as a real human being, but with the clear understanding that he did so as one empowered by the Spirit of God. Given time, the larger temptation would actually turn out to be engaging in the theological mathematical enterprise itself, as if there could be a satisfactory and reasonable explanation for what remains a fundamental mystery in Christian theology. Still, this has not stopped many a theologian from trying to provide just such a rational explanation.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., J.G. Sahl, "The Impeccability of Jesus Christ," *BS* (1983): 11–20 (19–20). See also K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1, part 2: *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1963), and vol. 4, part 2: *The Doctrine of Reconciliation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1967): "The meaning of the New Testament is that Jesus cannot sin, that the eternal Word of God is immune from temptations even in the flesh, that Jesus is bound to win in the struggle." Jesus "really had no awareness of sin. That is the truth of the *vere Deus*" (IV.2, 63; I.2, 157). See also F. Schleiermacher's influential articulation of the inability of Jesus to sin in his classic *The Christian Faith* (London: T&T Clark, 1999; originally published in 1830), 361–363, 371–374, 385–387, 413–416.

Part of the problem in Christian reflection on the potential capacity for Jesus to sin rests in how Augustine and later theologians formulated the situation of humanity, especially in light of Adam. When God created Adam and Eve, the argument goes, the first humans had the *posse non peccare*, the ability not to sin. But after the Fall, after they sinned, their status changed to a *non posse non peccare*, an inability *not* to sin (i.e., they had no choice but to sin). They had been created in the *imago dei* (the image of God), but after their disobedience their nature was now a sinful nature. This is why God had to expel them from the garden. They could no longer remain on holy ground. This sinful nature, according to Augustine, was transmitted in the very birth process (truly sin was the first sexually transmitted disease!).<sup>10</sup> This is why Jesus had to be born outside the normal process of human birth, according to Christian theology, and why Mary herself had to be free from the taint of sin. Hence the immaculate conception of Mary anticipates the virgin birth of Jesus, though the logic of this sequence is actually the reverse.

With the coming of Jesus, however, the situation of humanity changed. Like Adam, indeed as a new Adam, Jesus had the *posse non peccare*, the capacity not to sin, since he had not been born as a regular human being, but came – as Adam had – directly from God. Because God fully participated in the identity of Jesus in a way that was not the case for Adam, Jesus had a status never before seen among humans – *non posse peccare*, the inability to sin. His divine nature meant that he was incapable of committing sin, though he was capable of experiencing temptation. What it means to have the capacity to experience temptation without being able to sin is a problem, to say the least, that was never worked out very well or very convincingly. Inevitably something of either Jesus' real humanity or his real divinity would be sacrificed, because the divine knows nothing of the experience of sin (except to be on the receiving end of it from human unfaithfulness), and the human knows nothing of real perfection and so is fated to sin. How could perfection and imperfection dwell in the same person? For all of these reasons the temptation narrative posed a special problem for Christian tradition, especially during the Christological councils when the church leaders were

<sup>10</sup> The classical locus of Augustine's discussion about sin and impeccability can be found in his treatise *De correptione et gratia* (*On Rebuke and Grace*), 11.31 – 12.35.

trying to work out the secret formula for Jesus' fully human and fully divine nature – two natures in one person.<sup>11</sup>

#### TEMPTING HISTORY

A final question regarding the temptation story involves the relationship between history and theology. How did or does anybody know what took place? Did Jesus tell his disciples after the fact what had transpired between him and Satan? Did he give them a blow-by-blow account of the various scripture passages that had been used by him and by Satan, and then go on to describe how the angels had come to minister to him (at least in Mark and Matthew)? More likely historically is some generic understanding, such as given in Mark, that Jesus went into the wilderness for a time of prayer and discernment, a time that even Mark characterizes in overt theological language as the Spirit driving Jesus into the desert in order to be tested by Satan. The Q tradition of Matthew and Luke has expanded on the simple report of the temptation with a creative encounter that is faithful to what the earliest Christians imagined as appropriate to what should or might have taken place in such a scene. The goal of the Q material thus appears to be threefold: to affirm Jesus' identity as Son of God, to show Jesus filled by God's protective Spirit, and to present Jesus as tested and sinless. The temptation story retrospectively accomplishes each of these goals in anticipation of the beginning of Jesus' public ministry even amid the scandals that would unfold regarding family, friends, and faith, to which we now turn our attention.

<sup>11</sup> See especially I.J. Davidson, "Pondering the Sinlessness of Jesus Christ: Moral Christologies and the Witness of Scripture," *IJST* 10:4 (2008): 372–398; A.T. Hart, "Sinlessness and Moral Responsibility: A Problem in Christology," *SJT* 48:1 (1995): 37–54; H.P. Owen, "The Sinlessness of Jesus," in S.R. Sutherland and T.A. Roberts, eds., *Religion, Reason and the Self* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1989), 119–128; D. Bathrellos, "The Sinlessness of Jesus: A Theological Exploration in the Light of Trinitarian Theology," in P.L. Metzger, ed., *Trinitarian Soundings in Systematic Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 113–126; and the debate between T. Lorenmeyer, "Wider das Dogma von der Sündlosigkeit Jesu," *ET* 31:9 (1971): 452–471, and H. Gollwitzer, "Zur Frage der Sündlosigkeit Jesu," *ET* 31:9 (1971): 496–506.

## The Scandal of Family

WE HAVE ALREADY SEEN THE SCANDAL THAT BOTH MATTHEW and Luke sought to address regarding the birth of Jesus. In Matthew we found Joseph neither wanting to shame Mary nor shame himself and his own family by marrying his betrothed, who was already with child by another. Only with divine intervention does Joseph come to realize just who this “other” is and that Mary is righteous after all. At least that is how Matthew has chosen to handle the potential scandal of Jesus’ birth. We also saw possible allusions in the Gospel of John to Jesus having been born illegitimately (8:41). The possible scandal associated with Jesus’ birth generated a staunch defense of his birth as part of a sacred story, a story that involved the retrojection of beliefs about the crucified and risen Jesus among his followers.

The scandal of family during Jesus’ public ministry had less to do with his origins and more to do with his sayings and actions regarding what might be termed “traditional family values” in first-century Jewish Palestine. On the one hand we do encounter Jesus endorsing various aspects of traditional family structures. Three such features would include the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law (Mark 1:29–31), the positive reference to the Ten Commandments (Mark 7:9ff.), and Jesus’ affirmation of marriage (Mark 10:5ff.). The healing of Peter’s mother-in-law is a straightforward miracle story. What stands out is the observation that Peter is clearly married and that Peter’s joining Jesus’ group of disciples has not undercut Peter’s practical care for his wife’s mother. We learn later from Paul that Peter’s wife even accompanied him on his missionary travels (1 Cor. 9:5). The positive references to the Ten Commandments include the commands to honor father and mother, an extremely important value for maintaining a stable and caring society. And though there is no evidence that Jesus was ever married, it is nonetheless significant that he seems to endorse the

practice of marriage, a practice that would later come to be somewhat problematic within Christian tradition.

#### CALLED TO A NEW FAMILY

On the other hand, however, we find significant traditions where Jesus caused relative scandal regarding the value of family, and scandal to his relatives. We can see this both in regard to other families and especially in regard to his own family. Jesus appears to undermine respect for one's parents when he calls his first disciples in Mark 1:19–20 (parallel in Matt. 4:21–22): “As he [Jesus] went a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.” This passage occurs as the second of two call narratives; Jesus first calls Simon and Andrew to become fishers of people, and they immediately leave their nets to follow Jesus (Mark 1:16–18). The calling of James and John, the sons of Zebedee, is narrated in quick succession, and it holds within it various problems. When James and John leave their father to follow Jesus, they leave him in the boat with hired hands.<sup>1</sup> They leave him with no legitimate heirs, no one to carry on the family business, so far as we know, and no one to provide for their mother in the case of Zebedee's death.<sup>2</sup> They also leave a livelihood behind, becoming itinerant disciples with their itinerant teacher.

While it is impossible to say how Zebedee responded to this decision on the part of his sons (perhaps he also knew Jesus and revered him?), it is not difficult to imagine that their decision left Zebedee in a very awkward position. James and John certainly were not demonstrating the traditional respect that children, even grown children, owed to their parents and especially to their father. How would they care for their parents as they aged? How would they generate enough income to support themselves, let alone to support other family members? Were they married? Did they have children they left behind? Did their family feel that they had gone off to join some wild-eyed prophet in the wilderness, forsaking the traditional responsible life of extended family (parents, spouse, siblings, children) for

<sup>1</sup> Perhaps, as J. Marcus suggests, the reference to the hired hands is Mark's way of letting the reader know that the two sons have not left their father without any help at all (*Mark 1–8* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000], 181).

<sup>2</sup> Later in Jesus' ministry Matt. 20:20 records that the mother of the sons of Zebedee asks Jesus for her sons to have special honor in the kingdom. She also appears at the foot of the cross in Matt. 27:56. This indicates that at least the mother and her sons were followers of Jesus.

lives bound not by blood but by common belief? Have they shifted their allegiance entirely to Jesus, or would they come back from time to time to check in and help out? The Gospel of Mark, and also Matthew, suggests a potentially radical break with one's previous life and a radical commitment to a newly formed family, a new brotherhood centered around the charismatic Jesus.<sup>3</sup> What kind of prophet from God would displace the traditional family in this way? At least in the story of Elisha leaving his parents to follow Elijah, we are told that Elijah allowed Elisha to return home to say farewell to his parents before he joined Elijah (1 Kings 19:19–21).

#### LEAVE THE DEAD TO BURY THEIR OWN DEAD

Things do not improve when it comes to the Q tradition about a disciple who wants to follow Jesus, but first wants to honor his deceased father by burying him: "Another of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.' But Jesus said to him, 'Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead'" (Matt. 8:21–22; Luke 9:59–60). This does not appear to be hyperbole on Jesus' part. Rather, Jesus is making a radical claim on the life of his followers. Traditional family values have been displaced by a new eschatological ethic.<sup>4</sup> There is no time to waste, no delay that is acceptable, no earthly responsibility that has not been superseded by a heavenly calling. As noted by Joel Green, the calling of God's kingdom may require one "to engage in behavior deemed deviant by normal conventions."<sup>5</sup> In this case the deviant behavior results from Jesus' call for deviance from societal norms.

While it is possible that the burial referred to here may be the practice of "secondary burial," which took place a year after the primary burial when the body had decayed and the bones were then placed in an ossuary, even secondary burial was an important part of the tradition of honoring one's parents.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the understanding is that those who are spiritually alive

<sup>3</sup> See S.C. Barton, *Discipleship and Family Ties in Mark and Matthew* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 57–124, and R.J. Bauckham, "The Family of Jesus," in C. Keith and L.W. Hurtado, eds., *Jesus among Friends and Enemies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 103–126.

<sup>4</sup> So also N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996), 402. See further B. Malina and R. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2002), 56.

<sup>5</sup> J. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 408; Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 401.

<sup>6</sup> See E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 252–255, and especially B. McCane, *Roll Back the Stone: Death and Burial in the World of Jesus* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003).

must leave behind all familial ties to follow Jesus and that those who are spiritually dead can bury the physically dead.<sup>7</sup> In either case the saying of Jesus remains as a disturbing criticism of anyone who would put responsibilities of kinship above responsibilities of radical discipleship, even as a temporary measure. (It is also interesting simply to note that early Christianity in Rome was closely linked to the catacombs as a place of gathering, burial, and artistic representation.)<sup>8</sup>

Could the man who wanted to bury his father not both fulfill his familial duties and remain a strong disciple? Was Jesus or the early Christian community worried about a slippery slope, that one familial duty might lead to another and another, so that a person would never take the fundamental step to enter into discipleship? Was the problem one of divided loyalties, such that kinship could not in fact strengthen faith? Or was this simply the most extreme way of posing the issue? Peter did, after all, have a wife who traveled with him; Priscilla and Aquila were a married couple in the faith; James and John were brothers by blood (sons of Zebedee) as well as by faith. This was no small overlap between family and faith. No doubt James, the brother of Jesus, could attribute much of his leadership position in the Jerusalem church to his filial relationship with Jesus.<sup>9</sup>

#### PHYSICAL FAMILY VERSUS FAITH FAMILY

Even though family and faith could have significant and understandable overlap, it remains important that the rhetoric of early Christian discourse stressed and assumed fundamental discord between family and faith. Perhaps such discord finds no better expression than the Q sayings of Jesus in Matthew 10:34–38 (with parallel in Luke 8:19–21):

Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., J. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I–IX* (Garden City, NY:Doubleday, 1981), 836; Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 408–409.

<sup>8</sup> See L.V. Rutgers, *Subterranean Rome: In Search of the Roots of Christianity in the Catacombs of the Eternal City* (Leuven: Peeters, 2000).

<sup>9</sup> See J. Painter, *Just James: The Brother of Jesus in History and Tradition*, 2nd ed. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 42–57.

This passage relies heavily upon Micah 7:6: “For the son treats the father with contempt, the daughter rises up against her mother, the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; your enemies are members of your own household.” In Matthew’s hands (via Q) the added comment of Jesus views one’s biological family primarily as a threat to faith and discipleship. Why would this be? The teachings of Jesus were certainly suspect and controversial, to say the least, among the Jewish leaders of the day. His teachings challenged their interpretation of the Jewish law. He seemed not to be engaged as one rabbi among others, trying to convince others through careful argument that his interpretation should prevail. Rather, he made authoritative pronouncements about the way things were and the way they should be, against many of the traditions of the law. There were no rabbinic gradations of gray in his teaching.<sup>10</sup> One was either for him or against him. Anyone who chose to follow him as a disciple should expect nothing less than serious conflict, and not only with the religious authorities. One should expect conflict within one’s own family as well. For to follow Jesus, to follow this deceiver and perverter of the law (as many or most of the teachers saw things), meant to align oneself equally against many accepted religious traditions and authorities of the day (John 7:12). Eventually such conflict could even result in being expelled from the community, as reportedly happened with the man born blind in John 9 (see also John 12:42). It is no accident that Jesus both experienced and anticipated significant rejection on the part of the crowds he addressed and that he was occasionally thrown out of town (Matt. 8:34; Mark 5:17; 6:11; Luke 4:29; 8:37; 9:53). His teachings were as dangerous for the status quo and for existing family structures as they were provocative.

A more subtle expression of this tension between family and faith can be found in the episode from Luke 10:38–42 regarding the sisters Martha and Mary in relation to Jesus. Martha had welcomed Jesus into her home and had as a result taken on the responsibility of offering Jesus appropriate hospitality.<sup>11</sup> Such duties would normally extend to other family members also, including Martha’s sister Mary. While Martha was bustling about attending to her many tasks, Mary was sitting at Jesus’ feet listening to his teaching. Martha apparently grew increasingly annoyed with her sister Mary for not seeing the need to help her with her tasks. She could have asked Mary

<sup>10</sup> The exception occurs when an evangelist has apparently added a qualifier such as Matthew’s famous “exception clause” in 5:32 regarding the prohibition of divorce except in cases of unchastity.

<sup>11</sup> See J. Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1985).



directly for help. Instead, however, Luke has Martha appeal to Jesus as authoritative teacher: “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me” (10:40). By making this plea Martha seems confident that Jesus will teach Mary a lesson, shaming her into helping Martha. The male authority will surely put Mary in her place. But Martha ends up being the one shamed, her traditional family values subordinated to a reordered set of values in which being attentive to Jesus as teacher takes precedence over being attentive to Jesus as guest. “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her” (10:41–42). Jesus seems to be telling Martha that she should be the one joining Mary in discipleship, not that Mary should join Martha in the kitchen.

#### HATEFUL FAMILY

The kind of tension we see between Mary and Martha over family and faith takes on a much harsher tone in Luke 14:26–27 (an amplification of the Q material from Luke 8:19–21): “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” Here, conflict with family is not simply something that one is warned about; rather, such conflict serves as something of a litmus test for whether or not one is a true disciple. Renunciation of one’s natural family appears to be a virtue to embrace. The disciples make a point of reminding Jesus of everything that, in fact, they have given up and abandoned in order to follow him. In Matthew 19:27–29 we hear Peter’s protestations in the face of Jesus’ very difficult statement about how difficult it will be for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God:

Then Peter said in reply, “Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?” Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life.”

Nothing short of radical discipleship is required by Jesus, leaving everything behind that would hinder following him toward the coming kingdom. Such discipleship will be rewarded in the heavenly realm, as the faithful disciples

who have renounced all for Jesus will be seated with him in power and glory. As the new Israel they will judge the Israel of old. And whatever loss they have suffered (and the presumption seems to be that they have indeed suffered loss on account of their faith) will be restored a hundredfold.

The motif of hatred between believer and family finds further development in Jesus' apocalyptic discourse from Mark 13:12–13, with parallels in Matthew 10:21–22 and Luke 21:16–17. This time it is not that the believer must hate his or her own family, as in Luke 14:26–27; rather, the believer must be prepared for hatred in the form of betrayal from his or her own family of origin. The parallel passages from the Synoptic Gospels read as follows:

<b>Matthew 10:21–22</b>	<b>Mark 13:12–13</b>	<b>Luke 21:16–17</b>
Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.	Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.	You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name.

Matthew copies Mark's version verbatim, while Luke's version gives a slightly abbreviated statement, leaving off the reference to children betraying their parents. In all of the accounts the hatred of families toward believers will be so strong that they would rather see their family members put to death than to have themselves tarnished by the scandalous faith of Jesus' followers. As Joel Marcus and others point out, the Markan disintegration of the family described here is an aspect of the eschatological climax of the final days, a motif found in other early Jewish apocalyptic and prophetic literature as well (Isa. 19:2; Ezek. 38:21; 1 Enoch 56:7; Mic. 7:1–7).<sup>12</sup>

#### FAITHFUL FAMILY

Still, rejection of natural family does not seem to be a requirement for faithful discipleship. Only when such family allegiances hamper one's ability to follow

<sup>12</sup> J. Marcus, *Mark 8–16* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 887–889. See also A.Y. Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2007), 606–607.

Jesus is such renunciation necessary. Peter did have a wife and mother-in-law who appear to have been within the orbit of his faithfully following Jesus. And in Matthew 20:20–22 we hear about the mother of the sons of Zebedee (James and John) interceding with Jesus on behalf of her sons. Whereas in Mark's version of this story the disciples themselves make this request of Jesus (Mark 10:35–38), Matthew has put this request on the lips of the brothers' mother. That she would even make such a request indicates that, at least in Matthew's view, the mother of James and John was still in close communication with her sons, perhaps even accompanying them, and that she understood Jesus' message enough to know that a heavenly reward had been promised to his followers. Especially striking is that Jesus responds to her bold request by addressing his comments not to her singularly, but to "you" plural (*ouk oidate ti aiteisthe*): "You do not know what you are asking." He could be addressing her and her sons collectively, or he could simply be speaking to her sons directly. The two sons are the ones who end up saying that they are able to drink the cup that Jesus drinks, though the very fact that they make their request for shared glory in the context of Jesus' passion prediction suggests that perhaps Jesus was correct – they had no clue what they were asking, and neither did she. But the involvement of the mother of the sons of Zebedee in this scene would seem to indicate that despite leaving their father in the boat with his hired servants in order to follow Jesus, the apron strings of their mother are not far away. The natural family members of Jesus' disciples, then, can apparently be involved in the establishment of a new family of faith centered around Jesus, but only to the extent that they are clearly subordinated to Jesus and his mission.

The utter fusing of family and faith can best be seen in the remarkable crucifixion narrative from the Gospel of John, where the mother of Jesus and the "beloved disciple" are at the foot of the cross together (John 19:25–27): "[S]tanding near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home." The beloved disciple is the ideal disciple in John's Gospel.<sup>13</sup> He always understands Jesus and serves as a mediator for Jesus to the other disciples, especially to Peter (John 13:23–25; 20:1–9; 21:7). As Jesus is dying on the cross, the author of John uses a wonderful double entendre

<sup>13</sup> See R.E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist, 1979).

to create new relationships that completely blur familial and faith connections. When Jesus says to his mother, “Woman, here is your son,” is he referring to himself upon the cross, to the beloved disciple standing next to her, or to both? And when he says to the beloved disciple, “Here is your mother,” what does this mean? Is the beloved disciple now Mary’s son (both literally and figuratively)? The next line only confirms the fusion of meaning here. Because the beloved disciple took Mary into his own home, presumably to care for her as a son (what happened to Jesus’ brothers from John 7?), he now takes on the identity of Jesus, caring for Mary in Jesus’ stead, and mediating the Spirit of God to the remaining disciples, just as Jesus had. Family and faith have completely fused here, but only because the beloved disciple believes and understands Jesus. Faith remains the primary orientation that coordinates the fusion with family in this scene.

#### JESUS AND HIS BIOLOGICAL FAMILY

Although connections between family and faith can occur and endure – even in profound ways – more common are extreme tensions between family and faith. This can be seen especially in Jesus’ relationship to his own family. It becomes quite clear that they are not quite sure what to do with him, and he is happy enough to employ language that both distances him from his immediate family and totally subordinates his family of origin to his family of faith. The most telling account occurs in Mark 3:19–21 and 3:30–35. In 3:19–21 we are told that after calling his disciples Jesus “went home; and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, ‘He has gone out of his mind.’” Curiously, Jesus’ “home” does not appear to be with his family, since they go out to restrain Jesus (to bring him to the family home?).<sup>14</sup> Rather, Jesus is at “home” with his disciples and those who are following him. The report that Jesus had gone out of his mind (literally, that he was “beside himself”) and that “He has an unclean spirit” (3:30) motivates his family to come and get him. Are they embarrassed by Jesus? Are they concerned that he may indeed be possessed by an unclean spirit? In 3:32–35 Jesus responds to the concern of his family:

<sup>14</sup> The Greek term for “restrain” here is *krateō*. The same word will be used in Mark 12:12 to describe the desire of the Jewish leaders to *arrest* Jesus, and again in 14:1, where “the chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to *arrest* [*kratesantes*] Jesus.”

A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.” And he replied, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

Significantly, Jesus’ family is outside the circle of disciples, and not only physically, but also spiritually.<sup>15</sup> Although the Christian tradition venerates Jesus’ mother Mary, such veneration is not really found in Mark’s Gospel. Mary appears only in passing with her family to come and collect Jesus amid the scandal he is causing. She remains outside the circle of faith in Mark. The response of Jesus completely downplays the significance of his biological family. The only family that matters to him is his family of faithful followers: “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother” (Mark 3:35). Is this to suggest that Jesus’ family of origin has ceased being his true family? Are they not doing the will of God? In seeking to restrain him are they proving, ironically, to be opposed to Jesus and his ministry?

Later on in Mark’s Gospel (6:1–6) we learn that Jesus visits his hometown, along with his disciples. As Jesus teaches in the synagogue the local townspeople are offended by him. The people know Jesus’ mother Mary and his brothers and sisters. The offense appears to be a case of familiarity breeding contempt, whereupon Jesus comments, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house” (6:4). Is Jesus suggesting that he has not been well treated by his own family in addition to the rejection he has experienced at the hands of the local townspeople? Jesus is amazed at their lack of belief, and as a result “he could do no deed of power there,” except for healing a few sick people with the laying on of hands (6:5). Significantly, Mark’s Jesus was *unable* (*ouk edunato*) to perform any miracle there because of the disbelief of the townspeople. Matthew, however, is uncomfortable with limiting the power of Jesus in this way, and so Matthew changes it to: Jesus “did not do many mighty works there” (*ouk epoiēsen*). For Matthew it is not that he *was unable* to do deeds of power, but that he *did not* (i.e., chose not to) do *many* mighty works there. Still, the points are similar, namely, that Jesus was estranged from both his family and from his hometown.

What we have seen in this section on the scandal of family are not just tensions in Jesus’ teachings, but downright contradictions as these teachings

<sup>15</sup> Marcus suggestively refers to Jesus’ family here as a “more intimate enemy” (*Mark* 1–8, 285).

have been adapted and passed down in early Christian tradition. We have found both a major theme that stresses discord with one's family of origin and a minor theme that seems to affirm the reverencing of parents and the traditional bonds of family, in keeping with the Jewish law. How can the Markan Jesus, for example, affirm the command to honor one's parents and in the next breath dishonor Mary by casting her as one outside the circle of faith, indeed as merely Jesus' biological mother and apparently nothing more (Mark 3)? How can Luke, by contrast, maintain a strong emphasis on Mary as a favored servant of God, who in Mary's song of praise (the Magnificat) already preaches the Gospel even before Jesus' birth (Luke 1:46–55), and yet at the same time have Jesus declare (hyperbolically?) that one must hate one's family in order to be his disciple? How can Matthew have Jesus stress the commandments of the Mosaic law, and yet show Jesus demanding that a man must choose between following Jesus and burying his father (8:21–22)? In all of these ways, and more, we see Jesus in the various Gospels redefining family as the family of faith. A family of origin may not necessarily stand in conflict with the radical discipleship called for by Jesus, but one should not be surprised if the fundamental relationship with one's family of origin involves conflict, rejection, and even hatred. Even Jesus' own family thought he was crazy and came to take him away (Mark 3). Certainly Jesus' teaching on family and the complete dominance of the faith family over the birth family did not endear him to the bearers of Jewish tradition. People were scandalized by him because he taught scandalous things. In what sense were they scandalous? Ironically, they were scandalous in a very traditional sense – scandal as a wrong and dangerous way of living not in keeping with God's revealed will as articulated in God's law. The scandal of Jesus' teachings and actions rested in how they subordinated traditional teachings and actions regarding family to a new understanding of family linked not by blood but by faith. As we shall see, the scandal of Jesus involved not only his approach to traditional family values, but also the kinds of people with whom he associated as friends.

## The Scandal of Friends

**A**MONG THE MORE POPULAR WRITINGS ABOUT WISDOM IN EARLY Judaism was the book of Sirach, translated from Hebrew into Greek around 132 BCE (a complete Hebrew version does not survive). Although not part of the Jewish or Protestant canons of scriptures, Sirach has been an important Apocryphal writing within the Catholic canon of scriptures since the early centuries of Christianity, and it generated a large amount of commentary literature. Sirach provides extensive reflections on practical wisdom, much along the same lines as Proverbs. And like Proverbs, Sirach has much to say about friendship. One striking passage occurs in Sirach 13:13–17:

Be on your guard and very careful,  
for you are walking about with your own downfall.  
Every creature loves its like,  
and every person the neighbor.  
All living beings associate with their own kind,  
and people stick close to those like themselves.  
What does a wolf have in common with a lamb?  
No more has a sinner [*hamartōlos*] with the devout [*eusebē*].

The wisdom of Sirach is direct and to the point. Be careful about those with whom you associate, for you will be defined in large measure by the friends you keep.<sup>1</sup> Just as a wolf and a lamb have nothing in common, so also a devout person has nothing in common with a sinner. Or as the New American Bible translates it, “Is a wolf ever allied with a lamb? So it is with the sinner and the just [*eusebē*]” (Sir. 13:17). Apparently Jesus was not much impressed by the wisdom teaching of Sirach and its practical advice to stay away from sinners.

<sup>1</sup> Sirach refers to friends (*philos*) more than any other biblical writing (more than forty times).

Instead, the people with whom Jesus associated during his public ministry only confirmed the suspicions among Jewish leaders, and likely many of his contemporaries, that his example was leading people astray. Jesus was trouble not only because he challenged traditional commitments to family, but because he also associated with and sought out the wrong kind of people. And not just once or twice did Jesus keep bad company; rather, it was a matter of intentional habit. Nor did Jesus appear to see any problem with befriending those who were considered less than righteous and of questionable moral character. If Jesus was going keep the company of known sinners, then nobody should be surprised that he was, in turn, tarnished with the same accusation. At the very least this was definitely a case of guilt by association. Did not Jesus know the proverbial wisdom cited by Paul, that “Bad company ruins good morals”?<sup>2</sup> Or did he simply disagree with it? What kind of moral vision did Jesus have that led him to scandalize his fellow Jews by associating with those deemed sinners by the established religious leaders? Why these friends?

#### JUDAS AND SATAN

Ironically, one of the few times Jesus addresses anyone as “friend” occurs in Matthew 26:49–50, when Judas betrays Jesus with a kiss in the Garden of Gethsemane. “At once [Judas] came up to Jesus and said ‘Greetings, Rabbi!’ and kissed him. Jesus said to him, ‘Friend [*hetaire*], do what you are here to do.’ Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and arrested him.” While early Christian tradition came to link Judas with the demonic (Luke 22:3, “Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot”), some of the accusations against Jesus were grounded in the perception that Jesus himself was in league with the devil and that it was with demonic powers that Jesus was able to cast out demons: “And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, ‘He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons’” (Mark 3:22; Matt. 12:24; Luke 11:15). The followers of Jesus, of course, portray Jesus as countering that such a charge was ridiculous, for how could Satan be divided against himself and still stand (Luke 11:18)? Nonetheless, it is significant that as his contemporaries tried to reconcile Jesus’ charismatic power with his violation of the Jewish law, some of them came to what seemed the only logical conclusion: that Jesus must be dancing with the devil, since he so

<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor. 15:33. Paul is citing a proverbial maxim from the Greek poet Menander (*Thais*, fragment 218). In the context of 1 Cor. 15:33 Paul seems to be referring to those who would deny the resurrection of the body.



clearly transgressed the Mosaic law and its interpretation by the religious authorities of the day.

The charge that Jesus was possessed by the devil was also associated with the accusation that he was a false prophet misleading the people (see Matt. 24:63; John 7:12, 47).<sup>3</sup> While Matthew and John (significantly the two most Jewish of the Gospels) both go out of their way to show that Jesus is the “prophet like Moses” whom God promised to the people (Deut. 18:15; Matt. 5:21–48; John 1:45), the Jewish leaders who opposed Jesus saw him as a false prophet who warranted death, just as the law made clear: “[A]ny prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak – that prophet shall die” (Deut. 18:20). As Bruce Malina and Jerome Neyrey have observed, Jesus was perceived as a social deviant because his words and actions so contradicted not only societal norms, but also the religious norms as set out in sacred scriptures and expounded by the contemporary religious leaders.<sup>4</sup> One way of making sense of Jesus’ collective deviance was by attributing it to his demonic connection and his status as a false prophet. Thus, his exorcisms were not to be seen as proof of his divine connections; rather, they proved he was in league with Satan. In this light, “all of his activity – eating with sinners, exorcizing of demons, violating of Sabbath and washing rules – validated the charge. The function of the accusation was to bring about the eradication of Jesus.”<sup>5</sup> By calling his authority into question in this manner, the goal was to discredit him completely and to set the groundwork for his demise. This goal was accomplished, finally, when he was put to death.

#### TRANSGRESSING FRIENDLY BOUNDARIES

If the charges of consorting with the demonic did not stick so well, the accusations that Jesus befriended the wrong kind of people were more difficult to shake, and neither does it appear that Jesus was particularly concerned to change his associations in light of such accusations. The Gospel traditions are replete with stories of Jesus transgressing thresholds that included scandalous associations with individuals known for their immoral

<sup>3</sup> See D. Sheets, “Jesus as Demon-Possessed,” in S. McKnight and J. Modica, *Who Do My Opponents Say I Am?: An Investigation of the Accusations Against the Historical Jesus* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 27–49.

<sup>4</sup> B. Malina and J. Neyrey, *Calling Jesus Names: The Social Value of Labels in Matthew* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> Sheets, “Jesus as Demon-Possessed,” 33.

behavior as well as with those who were considered ritually unclean and socially ostracized. The violation of purity laws was not in and of itself a moral transgression, but it did raise serious questions about Jesus' stance toward the law in general, and the oral law in particular. As for immoral characters, the rogues' gallery includes tax collectors, women of questionable reputation, those who ate and drank excessively, and a generic mix of individuals simply known as "sinners," namely, those who were viewed as engaging in behaviors contrary to the Jewish law.<sup>6</sup> And given the common conviction that sickness could be a result of sin (see John 5:14; 9:1–2), the healing ministry of Jesus could also indicate an inappropriate or excessive association with those who were ill.

#### TABLE FELLOWSHIP, SIN, AND MISS MANNERS

A good example of Jesus' questionable associations can be found in his practice of table fellowship.<sup>7</sup> In first-century Palestine, Jesus chose to associate with members of society who were deemed immoral according to the religious authorities of the day. The priests responsible for the orderly running of the Jerusalem Temple, the scribes and Pharisees who specialized in adapting the Jewish law to the times, and even the Essenes who had sequestered themselves in the desert to pursue ritual and moral purity above the fray – all of these groups found the kinds of people with whom Jesus associated to be sinful in one way or another, and not just in a superficial sense but in a way that collectively threatened Israel's covenant relationship with God. Religious leaders could and did appeal to such individuals to repent, but for a would-be religious figure to have significant and regular social interaction with these "sinners" apart from their repentance was a path not to greater righteousness but one of folly. Even John the Baptist knew this and preached it, offering a baptism of repentance for forgiveness

<sup>6</sup> See further the discussion by G. Carey, *Sinners: Jesus and His Earliest Followers* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), 17–36.

<sup>7</sup> See the summary discussion of Jesus' table fellowship in J. Becker, *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1998), 155–169; J.D.G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 599–608; and C. Blomberg, *Contagious Holiness: Jesus' Meals with Sinners* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2005). On the possibility that Jesus' table fellowship may have included Gentiles, see M.F. Bird, *Jesus and the Origins of the Gentile Mission* (London: T&T Clark International, 2006), 104–108. See also K.E. Corley, *Private Women, Public Meals: Social Conflict and Women in the Synoptic Tradition* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), who argues that Jesus' inclusion of women in public meals caused significant scandal for his contemporaries.

of sins. John offered forgiveness to those who sought repentance, whereas Jesus appears to have accepted people of questionable moral standing without first demanding that they repent.<sup>8</sup> In short, Jesus associated with the wrong kind of people, and the notion of guilt by association seemed to stick. This charge against Jesus finds explicit expression in Mark 2:14–17:

As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up and followed him. And as he sat at dinner in Levi’s house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples – for there were many who followed him. When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” When Jesus heard this, he said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners [*hamartōlous*].”

Here Jesus has called a tax collector, Levi, to follow him as a disciple. Levi welcomes the invitation of Jesus, and in turn he invites Jesus to be his dinner guest at his home, along with other tax collectors and “sinners.” Jesus appears quite willing to put up with the scandal and objections that this behavior causes among the scribes and Pharisees.

Why did they consider Jesus’ actions here to be scandalous? Tax collectors in Palestine at the time of Jesus had a notorious reputation for graft. These particular tax collectors (*telōnai*) were responsible for collecting indirect taxes, particularly tolls on the transportation of goods. Such toll collectors would bid on contracts, and then had the authority to collect as much beyond their contracts as they could get away with. Thus there was plenty of room for corruption and greed in the process.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Luke 3:13 shows tax collectors coming to John the Baptist in repentance. His advice: Don’t collect more than is appointed to you. Jesus’ willingness to eat with these tax collectors had the potential of suggesting a tacit endorsement of their immoral business practices, and so legitimating them. This behavior also opened Jesus to the charge that he himself was being influenced by the sinful values of such questionable characters. If Jesus were truly a righteous teacher, why would he even associate with such immoral people?

<sup>8</sup> This is the main point of E.P. Sanders’ argument regarding the relationship between Jesus and “sinners.” See his *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 182–208.

<sup>9</sup> The later rabbis also viewed tax collectors as inherently immoral. See the discussion in J. Marcus, *Mark 1–8* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 225–226. On tax collectors in imperial Rome, see E. Badian, *Publicans and Sinners: Private Enterprise in the Service of the Roman Republic* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1972).

A similar concern appears in Luke 19, in the story of Jesus and Zacchaeus. Luke goes out of his way to explain that Zacchaeus was not just a common tax collector, but the “chief” tax collector and that he was rich, in case this implication had passed by anybody. When Jesus invites himself to dine at Zacchaeus’ house, the response from the crowd is equally problematic: “All who saw it began to grumble and said, ‘He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner’” (Luke 19:7). If Jesus was willing to be the guest of a sinner, then perhaps Jesus was also a sinner. Why risk being tainted by such associations? Through his actions (giving half of his goods to the poor; repaying anyone he has wronged fourfold), Zacchaeus certainly demonstrates repentance, but the point seems to be that people expected repentance to come first, and only then acceptance back into the community. Jesus seems to be practicing a radically different approach, one that accepts the sinner without the requisite repentance first. Jesus thus engages in a dangerous precedent of accepting and treating a sinner as a member of the community, with or without repentance. Such actions can lead to the introduction of sin into the community, where it can fester (see Paul’s complaint in 1 Cor. 5). Is not Jesus’ blurring of boundaries between sin and righteousness itself sinful?

And then there is the story of the sinful woman who anoints Jesus’ feet while Jesus is at table in the home of a Pharisee named Simon (Luke 7:37–50). For Simon, this little incident is proof that Jesus cannot really be a prophet, for if he were “he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him – that she is a sinner [*hamartōlos*]” (Luke 7:39). In this case the taint is quite physical. Jesus was allowing himself to be touched by a sinful woman, not at all proper etiquette. And yet in this same account Jesus goes on to reprimand his host for not providing the appropriate hospitality (washing of feet, a kiss, anointing with oil), which this sinful woman had offered in abundance (Luke 7:44–46). Far from not being a prophet, Jesus engages in prophetic critique of a religious teacher and leader who is quick to judge another but fails to see his own failings. This reversal of sin takes on even sharper tones in the conclusion of the scene, when Jesus pronounces that the woman’s sins, which are many, have been forgiven. Those at table are shocked by this pronouncement (Luke 7:49): “Who is this who even forgives sins?” It was scandal enough that Jesus allowed himself to be touched by a sinful woman, but now Jesus has evoked even more scandal by declaring her sins forgiven. When Jesus similarly forgave the sins of a paralyzed man in Luke 5:20–21 (Mark 2:5–7; Matt. 9:2–3), the response of the scribes and Pharisees was direct and to the point: “Who is this who is speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God

alone?” Where does Jesus get the authority to declare such forgiveness? Indeed, from the perspective of the scribes and Pharisees, by claiming authority to forgive the sins of others, Jesus in fact sins himself, committing blasphemy against God, usurping God’s own authority and the mechanisms God had established in the law for forgiveness of sins through appropriate ritual penitence as overseen by the Temple priests.

Jesus’ forgiveness of the woman while he is at Simon’s table results in the implicit indictment of his host for missing the mark, for sin. By judging the woman, and by judging Jesus for his indulgence of the woman, Simon ends up pronouncing judgment on himself. While Simon is guilty of the relatively modest omission of extending the appropriate hospitality to Jesus, which the sinful woman has provided in his stead, he is also guilty of the more important failure to recognize the woman as someone more than a mere sinner to be excluded from the table. For Luke, Jesus’ point seems to be that this woman belongs at this table even more than Simon does in his own house.

Jesus’ practice of table fellowship thus becomes the occasion for various scandals in connection with people who are known to be sinners. The response of Jesus to the scandal causes more problems still, increasingly linking Jesus to the possible spread of sin within the larger community of Jewish faith. This makes Jesus himself guilty of sowing sinful discord by accepting sinners apart from the requisite repentance. The parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15 arguably makes the same point. The sinful son who has wasted his inheritance on prostitutes and the like is now starving, and so he decides to return to his father’s home and to confess his sins. The irony here is that the son in fact does show the requisite repentance, but the father does not know this when he sees him coming from afar. Rather the father rejoices at the return of his son regardless of whether he receives a confession of sin. The father is not waiting to punish the son or to ban him from the house on account of his sinful behavior; rather, he prepares for a feast to celebrate the son’s return. Although the son is not aware of it, he cannot sin himself into no longer being the father’s son. It may well be that there is great rejoicing over the repentance of one sinner (Luke 15:10), but Jesus teaches that sinners are welcome at the table even without first repenting, and this causes grave scandal among the religious leaders.

To be sure, the passage from Mark 2:14–17 includes not only the complaint that Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners, but also Jesus’ response that “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners” (*ouk ēlthon kalesai dikaious alla hamartōlous*, 2:17). From the perspective of the scribes and

Pharisees, Jesus' approach to sinners is itself sinful, for it risks contamination of the community with sin rather than first removing the sin and only then welcoming the *repentant* sinner. But from the perspective of the Gospel writer, Jesus' very embrace of sinners provides its own contagion that will result in the restoration and reconciliation of the sick and the sinners both to God and to other people. There is indeed risk to the righteous community, but if this community is not reaching out to those outside its boundaries, then the community itself is operating in its own isolated sinfulness of self-righteousness (see, e.g., Luke 18:10–14), and its judgment on others becomes a judgment on itself. In this view there is only room for a community that recognizes its fundamental identity as one with the plight of those who are broken, those who stand in need of acceptance and love regardless of sin.

#### A GLUTTON AND A DRUNKARD

A matter related to meals arises in the Q material from Matthew 11 and Luke 7. In the context of discussing John the Baptist, and the failure of most people to respond positively to John's preaching of repentance, Matthew and Luke both draw on a Q saying of Jesus criticizing the current generation for their willful disregard of John's and Jesus' preaching alike. "For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say 'He has a demon'; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds" (Matt. 11:18–19; see Luke 7:33–35). The people had dismissed John the Baptist as simply a wild-eyed crazy preacher, living an ascetic lifestyle in the wilderness. John apparently did not participate in feasting with his disciples, or anyone else for that matter. But Jesus came and conducted his ministry without the same ascetic flair that John had emphasized. Jesus was accused of virtually the exact opposite practice as John. In this way both John and Jesus could be dismissed as religious fanatics not to be followed, even as dangerous individuals who would lead people astray.

In part, Jesus' table fellowship served as a sign of the messianic banquet to come (see Matt. 22:2–9; 25:10; Luke 12:36; 14:8–13). But as the accusation makes clear, this table fellowship was not with the righteous but with "tax collectors and sinners." Thus Jesus engaged in what might best be called meals of excess, or sinful meals, insofar as he actively sought out association with "sinners." As we have already seen, these sinners were guilty of serious breaches of the Jewish law, not only in ritual terms, but also in moral terms. To associate with such people was willfully to invite the condemnation that Jesus justly received. Just as these friends of Jesus were sinners, children of

Israel who had rebelled against God's law, so was Jesus by definition also a sinner, a "glutton and a drunkard," a rebellious son of Israel who warranted reprimand and punishment for his sinful associations. And to make matters worse, Jesus passed off such associations as though they were in keeping with God's very call to righteousness.

As we saw in Chapter 3, the charge of being a "glutton and a drunkard" has clear echoes from Deuteronomy 21:18–21 in view, even if the language is not exactly parallel.<sup>10</sup> Previously we were concerned with how the charge of being a glutton and a drunkard might have bearing on Jesus as a child. Here we are interested in how this charge relates to Jesus' activity during his public ministry as an adult. By invoking the language of "glutton and drunkard," Matthew invokes the larger framework and context of this legislation from Deuteronomy. The adult Jesus is a rebellious son who will not obey the traditions of the elders and teachers among the people. Jesus' behavior has consistently crossed the line to such a degree that he can well be labeled as a "deviant," challenging traditional boundaries, breaking the rules of social discourse and religious interaction.<sup>11</sup> He therefore warrants not only rejection but death, a severe judgment against his teaching and ministry.

In addition to the passage from Deuteronomy 21, the charge that Jesus was a "glutton and a drunkard" may also be read against Proverbs 23:20–21, which states: "Do not be among winebibbers, or among gluttonous eaters of meat; for the drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty, and drowsiness will clothe them with rags." This passage from Proverbs gives practical instruction on how to act wisely and not as a fool. To be among "drunkards"<sup>12</sup> was to act as a fool. Similarly, to be among sinners was also foolish. From the perspective of the larger religious commitments of first-century Jewish culture, then, Jesus' association with "the wrong kind of people" was not only akin to rebellion against the received tradition, but was also not the sign of a wise teacher at all; rather, it was an indication of a fool.<sup>13</sup> Far from being faithful to the law that God had given, Jesus was fooling himself if he

<sup>10</sup> See J.B. Modica, "Jesus as Glutton and Drunkard: The 'Excesses' of Jesus," in McKnight and Modica, eds., *Who Do My Opponents Say That I Am?*, 50–73, 74–75.

<sup>11</sup> See *ibid.*, 51–52; Malina and Neyrey, *Calling Jesus Names*, 36; N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996), 440; and H.C. Kee, "Jesus: A Glutton and a Drunkard," *NTS* 42 (1996): 374–393.

<sup>12</sup> See R. J. Karris, *Eating Your Way Through Luke's Gospel* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006), 26–27.

<sup>13</sup> On the tradition of "holy fools," see S.A. Ivanov, *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

thought he could associate with sinners and not be defiled ritually and especially morally in the process.<sup>14</sup>

The upstart Jesus and the more established religious leaders of his day engaged in fundamental conflict with each other over what God required. For the priests, scribes, Pharisees, and Essenes, God called the faithful to disassociate from those who were deemed sinful. This would include Gentiles by definition (see Paul's passing comment about "we who are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners" in Gal. 2:15) and especially those Jews who were not acting in accord with God's law as interpreted by the religious authorities. Again, Paul provides a helpful parallel here from the world of early Christianity. In 1 Corinthians 5 Paul admonishes the Corinthian Christians not to associate with other Christians who were acting in a sinful manner. Paul writes: "I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral persons – not at all meaning the immoral of this world, or the greedy and robbers, or idolaters, since you would then need to go out of the world. But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother or sister who is sexually immoral or greedy, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or robber. Do not even eat with such a one" (1 Cor. 5:9–11). Of particular interest is Paul's final comment here, that they should not even share table fellowship with a Christian who is acting in a sinful way. This approach fits the pattern well established among the Jewish religious leaders in regard to what kinds of friendships and associations one should maintain. Paul originally was, after all, a Pharisee (see Phil. 3). But apparently Jesus saw things differently, at least according to the Gospel accounts. As E.P. Sanders has argued, the scandal of Jesus' friendships with sinners was that he welcomed them to his table (and himself to theirs) without calling for their repentance.<sup>15</sup> This does not mean that repentance did not take place, but Jesus apparently did not make repentance a requirement for admission to his table. Rather, he proclaimed God's love even for sinners, even apart from repentance. Thus, one could argue, Jesus engaged in a leveling process that fundamentally did away with traditional distinctions between righteousness and sinfulness. The reversal of identity between

<sup>14</sup> C. Blomberg argues that Jesus "does not assume that he will be defiled by associating with corrupt people. Rather, his purity can rub off on them and change them for the better" (*Contagious Holiness: Jesus' Meals with Sinners* [Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2005], 128).

<sup>15</sup> See Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 198–206; E.P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (New York: Penguin Press, 1993), 226–237; J.P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, 4 vols. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991–2009), vol. 2: 211–212; Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 526–541.



sinner and saint stands out in Jesus' preaching as a distinctive and disturbing feature of his ministry.

#### BEFRIENDING WOMEN

One of the more unusual aspects of Jesus' ministry that resulted in more than a few raised eyebrows was his practice of including women among his disciples. In and of itself it is not so remarkable that women in general might be interested in what Jesus had to say. But the prominence of women among his followers, and the kind of women who are highlighted, is noteworthy. Although later Christian tradition came to emphasize the role of Jesus' mother Mary, any positive reference to her and her relationship to Jesus is conspicuously absent during his public ministry.<sup>16</sup> Instead, it is another Mary, Mary Magdalene, who has the most prominent role.

Mary Magdalene's first connection with Jesus is as a woman possessed by demons. In Luke 8:2 we are told that Jesus had cast seven demons out of Mary. We never hear about Mary having a husband, and so for the culture of her day that places her as an unmarried woman in uncomfortably close and regular proximity to an unmarried Jesus. Despite popular film depictions of Mary Magdalene as Jesus' love interest (e.g., *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *The Last Temptation of Christ*), such a relationship is not presented in the Gospel traditions. And in contrast to the popular tradition that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute, we find no such evidence in the Gospels. *That* she came to be thought of as sexually immoral, and *how* this happened is significant.<sup>17</sup>

The conflation of the four accounts about the woman anointing Jesus explains how this tradition developed. In Matthew (26:6–13) and Mark (14:3–9) we are simply told that a woman poured expensive ointment on Jesus' head. Jesus states that "what she has done will be told in remembrance of her" (Mark 14:9), though – of course – her name is never mentioned.<sup>18</sup> In Luke 7:37 we find a similar story, but here, and only here, Luke identifies the

<sup>16</sup> See J. Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

<sup>17</sup> See S. Haskins, *Mary Magdalene: Myth and Metaphor* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995), and E. de Boer, *Mary Magdalene: Beyond the Myth* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997). See also R. Ruether's contrast between Mary the mother of Jesus and Mary Magdalene in *Mary, the Feminine Face of the Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), and J.S. Siker, "Rosemary Radford Ruether: Scripture in Feminist Perspective," in J.S. Siker, *Scripture and Ethics: Twentieth Century Portraits* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 181–190.

<sup>18</sup> Hence the title of E. Schüssler Fiorenza's groundbreaking volume *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983).

woman as “a woman of the city, who was a sinner.” Interpreters have often concluded from this that the woman was a prostitute, though – as in Mark and Matthew – she goes unnamed. Only when we get to John’s version of the anointing of Jesus are we told the name of the woman, Mary of Bethany (Lazarus’ sister; John 12:1–8). And so let the conflation begin: woman anoints Jesus (Matt. and Mark) + *sinful* woman (a.k.a. prostitute) anoints Jesus (Luke) + *Mary* anoints Jesus (John) = Mary the sinful prostitute anoints Jesus. Which Mary? Well, it certainly cannot be the mother of Jesus. And so it must be a reference to the other prominent Mary, Mary Magdalene. In this way a popular tradition was born from a harmonization of the different Gospel accounts.

But Mary Magdalene is not the only would-be prostitute for whom Jesus appears as an advocate. In Matthew 21:31–32 we encounter Jesus in the Jerusalem Temple in dispute with the chief priests and elders of the people. Jesus presses them on whether or not the baptism, and hence ministry, of John the Baptist was from God. When they respond that they do not know, and so reject the legitimacy of John’s ministry, and by extension Jesus’ ministry as well, Jesus responds with a strong word of judgment against them: “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.” Once again Jesus engages in the inversion of the righteous and the sinner or, to put it more accurately, Jesus exposes the righteous as sinner, and the sinner as righteous before God. This welcoming of prostitutes along with tax collectors placed Jesus amid the most scandalous of sinners, whom he approached as those beloved by God.

The same could be said for Jesus’ dealing with the woman caught in adultery from John 8. Although this story was likely not part of the earliest versions of John’s Gospel (it is missing from the oldest manuscript tradition), the story itself resonates with the presence of sinful women elsewhere in the Gospel tradition. This well-known episode is remarkable for its depiction of Jesus’ response to the woman who has literally been caught in the act of sinning, committing adultery. (The obvious question in our day, of course, is “What about the *man* who was with her?”) When confronted with the prescription from the Mosaic law that such a sinner should be stoned to death, Jesus does not deny the penalty from the law, but he completely defuses it by inviting “anyone among you who is without sin” to be the first to throw a stone at her (John 8:7). We then hear the poignant result of this invitation, that beginning with the elders the people left one by one. In this

story Jesus clearly invokes the notion that people who live in glass houses should not throw stones. How can one sinner condemn another? Neither does Jesus condemn the woman, and in this he identifies with all the other sinners. By calling for forgiveness of sin, even egregious sin, Jesus again levels the playing field between the would-be righteous person and the would-be sinner. God loves and forgives the sinner just as God loves and forgives the righteous person who recognizes his or her own sinfulness and God's call for mercy. By siding with the woman caught in sin, Jesus again shows himself as the friend of sinners.

Another woman with whom Jesus has an inappropriate connection is the Samaritan woman from John 4.<sup>19</sup> It is bad enough that Jesus here is speaking with a Samaritan, but worse still that he is conversing alone with a woman at a well, a public place. The implicit disapproval even of his disciples is registered in John's Gospel: "Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman" (John 4:27). The author of John's Gospel uses this story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman as yet another vehicle to establish the divine identity of Jesus, but the story also shows Jesus interacting with a woman who appears caught in her own sinful situation. When Jesus tells her to call her husband and return, she replies that she has no husband. The all-knowing Johannine Jesus then answers (John 4:17–18), "You are right in saying 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" Even in speaking the truth the woman has apparently been caught in a lie. But Jesus says nothing by way of condemnation or judgment. She has spoken truthfully, if evasively, and the conversation continues with Jesus revealing himself to her as the messiah. She had come to draw water from the well, but now she leaves her water jar behind (John 4:28) because, as the Gospel writer makes clear, she has now come to drink of the spiritual water that Jesus has given her, and with that she has gone to bear witness to Jesus.

One final story about Jesus and a woman is important to examine, the account of the Syrophenician woman who comes to Jesus and asks him to heal her daughter, a story found in both Mark (7:24–30) and Matthew (15:21–28).<sup>20</sup> The woman is a Gentile (Mark refers to her as a Syrophenician, while Matthew calls her a Canaanite woman). The woman acts

<sup>19</sup> See S. Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1999); F. Moloney, *The Gospel of John* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998).

<sup>20</sup> See Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 461–470; A.Y. Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2007), 364–367.

inappropriately simply by approaching Jesus and speaking to him. Matthew states that Jesus did not answer her and that his disciples urged him to send her away (Matt. 15:23). But she persists, asking Jesus to cast a demon out of her daughter. But Jesus also persists, finally responding to her, and dismissing her in the process: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt. 15:24; see Matt. 10:7). But still she does not go away. “She came and knelt before him, saying ‘Lord, help me’” (Matt. 15:25). Then comes a very memorable comment by Jesus in response to the woman: “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs” (Matt. 15:26; Mark 7:27). Here Jesus all too clearly shares in the contemporary disdain that Jews had for Gentiles. His healing power is not for her or her daughter; it is only for those inside Israel. She is but a dog, not even a Gentile woman, not even fully human, and not worthy of his help. But her even more memorable retort wins the day: “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table” (Matt. 15:27; Mark 7:28). Only then does Jesus grant her desperate request: “Then he said to her, ‘For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter’” (Mark 7:29). Matthew reports that Jesus healed her daughter because of her great faith (Matt. 15:28).

This controversial story shows the Gentile woman besting Jesus. She is persistent and he relents. Her persistence includes withstanding Jesus’ initial rejection, as well as his characterizing her as a “dog.” This story does not fit the pattern of other stories we have examined regarding Jesus and women. Whereas Mary Magdalene had been possessed by demons, Luke’s woman with ointment was a known sinner, and the Johannine accounts of the Samaritan woman and the woman caught in adultery show women caught in sexual scandal, the story of the Gentile woman shows a devoted mother seeking healing for her daughter. While the other stories show Jesus interacting with women tainted by scandal or demons, in the account with the Gentile mother it is Jesus who comes across as the transgressor, the sinner. The woman had crossed boundaries to appeal to Jesus on behalf of her daughter,<sup>21</sup> but all Jesus sees is a non-Jew, not a mother fighting for her child. Jesus is unwilling to meet her as a person worthy of recognition, let alone help. He refuses to help her, and then he insults her. Only when she uses Jesus’ very degrading analogy of throwing food to the dogs, turning it to her advantage, does Jesus take notice of her and grant her request. Here Jesus fails to see this woman or her daughter as also worthy of God’s love. Instead

<sup>21</sup> See J.W. Aernie, “Borderless Discipleship: The Syrophoenician Woman as a Christ-Follower in Mark 7:24–30,” in *Bible, Borders, Belonging(s)*, J. Havea and D.J. Nevil, eds. (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2014), 191–207.

he treats her as a worthless Gentile. Indeed, rather than Jesus befriending this woman it appears that this woman has persisted in associating with a prickly Jesus. She challenges his prejudice and corrects him. She too is a child of God and not some dog. Here the woman is the teacher and Jesus is the one who must repent of his initial dismissal of the woman and daughter in need.<sup>22</sup>

Through these various friendships, then, from table fellowship with tax collectors and sinners to charges of gluttony and drunkenness to questionable relationships with women, Jesus' public ministry is full of sinful associations. Far from being a wise and righteous teacher, Jesus comes across as a foolish transgressor who is leading people astray, away from God and God's law. Such is the conclusion of the religious authorities whom Jesus challenged. Jesus conducted a ministry that caused scandal in relation to family, and scandal in relation to friends. All of this arises, however, as an extension of the foundational scandal of faith.

<sup>22</sup> See S. Van Den Eynde, "When a Teacher Becomes a Student: The Challenge of the Syrophoenician Woman (Mark 7.24–31)," *Theology* **103** (2000): 274–279.

## The Scandal of Faith

**I**N TURNING TO THE SCANDAL OF FAITH WE TURN TO THE HEART of the matter that caused so many of Jesus' contemporaries, particularly religious leaders, to view him as a sinner who was misleading the people. The overarching issue revolved around Jesus' rival interpretation of the Jewish law in contrast to the interpretation of the Pharisees, Sadducees, or Essenes. Because Jesus was significantly out of step with established religious authorities, and he claimed independent authority, the conflict over what it meant to be a faithful Jew impacted his entire ministry over a wide range of matters central to Jewish identity and covenant fidelity. From Sabbath observance to dietary laws, issues of purity, the role of the Jerusalem Temple, discerning the fulfillment of the Scriptures, and blasphemy against God – in all of these matters and more Jesus' vision of faith led to scandal and eventually to his death.

As we consider the various ways in which Jesus was seen as a transgressor in relation to Jewish faith and practice, we need to remember that such faith and practice comprised a dynamic and organic whole. While the Pharisees may have been experts in adapting the Jewish law to changing times, and the Sadducees may have held sway as priests over worship in the Jerusalem Temple, and the Essenes may have had a rival understanding of appropriate law observance and Temple worship, all of them recognized the inseparability of one component from another. All the different aspects of Jewish faith and practice were closely interrelated. Sabbath observance, keeping the purity laws, eating kosher food, making the appropriate sacrifice in the Temple, hearing the law expounded, maintaining hopes for God's messianic deliverance of God's people, revering the long heritage of Israel from one generation to another, one circumcision to another – all of these different aspects and more worked together to make the Jews the covenant people of God. Thus, although in the material that follows we will isolate different

factors of Jewish faith and practice and look at how Jesus approached them, we must remember the dynamic and relatively unified system of rituals, practices, and faith convictions that governed all of Jewish life, even as they found various configurations among different groups of Jews.<sup>1</sup>

One other preliminary comment is in order at this point. In some ways the material that follows is among the most difficult to assess, partly because of competing scholarly views about Jesus and his relation to first-century Jewish faith and practice, but also partly because of competing modern understandings of faith and practice, within both Jewish and Christian circles. The tendency to vilify the other is ever present. Vitriolic accusations against rival religious views were not uncommon in antiquity<sup>2</sup> and nor are they uncommon today. One time-honored method of asserting one's own righteousness and rectitude is by invoking the other's sinfulness and wrong-headedness.<sup>3</sup> There is often much heat and little light in such exchanges. My concern here is that the general flow of the argument not get lost or bogged down because of the sometimes technical nature of the material we will be considering. Further, my goal at this point is a fairly descriptive one, addressing the question of how and why it was that the program of Jesus' ministry was dismissed both derisively and violently by the religious and political leaders of his day. While the ways in which Jesus' contemporaries viewed his ministry as sinful in many ways do have implications for our understanding of faith and practice today, I will save much of that discussion for the final chapter of the book.

### JESUS THE LAW-BREAKER

To understand why Jesus was perceived as violating God's law in fundamental ways it is important to appreciate the character of Jewish law in the time of Jesus. The law referred primarily to the five books of Moses, the Torah (also known as the Pentateuch): Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, and Numbers. This was the written law. The sacred scriptures also included the prophets (especially the three major prophets – Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel), though these were less authoritative than the Mosaic Torah. Still further down the list of scriptures in terms of legal texts were various

<sup>1</sup> See E.P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief, 63 BCE–66 CE* (London: SCM Press, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> See especially L.T. Johnson, "The New Testament's Anti-Jewish Slander and the Conventions of Ancient Polemic," *JBL* 108 (1989): 419–441.

<sup>3</sup> In American political contexts of vilifying, see the intriguing study by J. Morone, *Hellfire Nation: The Politics of Sin in American History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003).

writings (the Psalms and Proverbs figured prominently here). In addition to the written law, however, there was an important body of oral commentary on the law that was handed down and that had increasingly become accepted as binding interpretation. These oral traditions were eventually written down and codified as the *Mishnah* toward the beginning of the third century CE. The *Mishnah*, in turn, became the basis for still further commentary and discussion among the rabbis and the various schools of rabbinic thought. Eventually this all led to the formation of the *Talmud* a few centuries later.<sup>4</sup> The oral traditions of the *Mishnah* were handed down in two general forms: the *halakah*, which consisted of binding oral laws (literally from the Hebrew word *halak*, to walk), and the *haggadah*, illustrative stories (e.g., the Passover *haggadah*). The vast bulk of the *Mishnah* consists of rabbinic debate over binding laws, some of it likely representing rabbinic traditions going back to the time of Jesus, though the debate over how to identify the earliest layers of tradition need not detain us here.

During the time of Jesus' ministry Jewish religious observance revolved around two pillars, the Torah and the Temple. With the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, however, Jewish faith and practice had to adapt quickly to revolving around Torah observance as *the* definitive marker for Jewish identity, which continued to find expression in synagogue worship and other Jewish practices. After 70 CE much of the rich diversity of pre-70 Judaism in Roman Palestine gave way to a more uniform expression of Judaism that became rabbinic Judaism. No more sacrificial system, no more priests in their traditional roles, no more Sadducees, Essenes, or Zealots; all were essentially destroyed by the Jewish War of 66–70. Thus, as important as Torah observance had been *before* the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, it became even more important *after* the Temple was destroyed. The early rabbis, who followed on the Pharisees, saw their sacred task as helping people to understand and observe both the spirit and the letter of the Jewish law, particularly at this time of crisis in Jewish identity within the Roman Empire. One way they expressed this commitment can be found in the *Mishnah* tractate *Pirke Aboth* (the Sayings of the Fathers). The *Pirke Aboth* begins in the following way:

Moses received the Law from Sinai and committed it to Joshua, and Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the Prophets; and the Prophets committed it to the men of the Great Synagogue. They said three things: Be deliberate

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., B. Holtz, *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986), and H. Strack and G. Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Augsburg, 1992).



in judgment, raise up many disciples, and make a fence around the Law. (1.1)<sup>5</sup>

The notion of making “a fence around the law” is an important feature of the early rabbinic approach to the Torah. The general idea was that if the law prohibited something, then one should not even get close to doing it, a kind of slippery-slope argument. Similarly, if the law gave a positive command, then one should go out of one’s way to fulfill it. In principle, Jesus did not necessarily disagree with the concept of building a fence around the law. For example, Jesus could intensify the law so that not only should one observe the external letter of the law with outward conformity, but also one’s inward disposition should be in keeping with the spirit of the law. This is a way in which Jesus himself built “a fence around the law.” Thus in Matthew 5:27–28 we read: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” The inward disposition that leads to the outward action is itself sinful, a transgression, not just the external act. The Pharisees of Jesus’ day would not have had a problem with this kind of fence-building. Indeed, the idea that the law should be written on one’s heart went back long before Jesus to the prophets of old. So Jeremiah could say that the days are coming when:

I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more. (Jer. 31:33–34)

When the law of God rests within the hearts of God’s people, then faithfulness will prevail and sin will be no more.

The problem that the Jewish religious leaders had with Jesus was that he tore down other fences that they had long established. Thus, as we have already seen, they struggled with Jesus’ practice of having table fellowship with sinners and tax collectors. By extension, they were more than annoyed that Jesus disregarded various traditions about food laws. They opposed Jesus’ breaking down the fence of what it meant to keep the Sabbath holy. They were stung by Jesus’ wanton disregard for their own religious authority. They were

<sup>5</sup> The translation comes from H. Danby, *The Mishnah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 446.

scandalized by Jesus' slander against the regulation of the Temple cult. And they regarded Jesus' own claims to authority from God as blasphemous. It is important to note that the "they" invoked here was not a monolithic "they"; rather, it consisted of different groups of Jewish religious leaders who had different but interrelated issues with Jesus.

The persistent and cumulative effect of Jesus' violation of the law put him well beyond the pale of legitimate teachers, his charismatic presence notwithstanding. Instead, Jesus was a false prophet leading the people astray. And he needed to be stopped. In what follows we will look at some specific instances of Jesus' transgression of the law. We shall see that these transgressions did not involve trifling matters but that Jesus' actions and teachings posed a serious challenge to the law, and hence to Jewish identity, as it was commonly understood in his time.<sup>6</sup>

#### SINS OF THE SABBATH

The Sabbath controversies in the New Testament have to do with disputes between Jesus and the religious authorities over what constitutes work.<sup>7</sup> Since it was not lawful to work on the Sabbath, the definition of what constituted work was important. In general the Pharisees adopted the interpretive principle we have just explored – building a fence around the law. Thus if the law stated that you should not work, then do not even come close to it. Do not even pluck a kernel of grain, for before you know it plucking a single kernel of grain could lead to harvesting sacks full of grain. Where does plucking a kernel of grain end and harvesting begin? Thus, do not even pluck a kernel of grain, lest one move down the path to violating the Sabbath in a more egregious manner. Unless it is a matter of life and death, everything can wait until the next day. Just as God rested on the Sabbath after creation, so should faithful Jews follow the commandment to rest on the Sabbath.

As it happens, the first Sabbath controversy we encounter in the Gospels involves the disciples of Jesus plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath as they

<sup>6</sup> See M. Bird, "Jesus as Law-Breaker," in S. McKnight and J. Modica, eds., *Who Do My Opponents Say I Am?: An Investigation of the Accusations Against the Historical Jesus* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 3–26, and W. Loader, *Jesus' Attitude Towards the Law* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), 518–524.

<sup>7</sup> See Mark 2:23–28 (Matt. 12:1–8; Luke 6:1–5); Mark 3:1–6 (Matt. 12:9–14; Luke 6:6–11); Luke 13:10–17; Luke 14:1–6; John 5:2–18; John 9:1–41. See also *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, in R. Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1996), vol. 2: 1–7.

were going through a grain field (Mark 2:23–28). “The Pharisees said to him, ‘Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?’”<sup>8</sup> The binding oral law was clear that one should not harvest in any way on the Sabbath.<sup>9</sup> Why did Jesus allow his disciples to act in such a manner? Jesus’ response is not particularly satisfactory. He appeals to the precedent of how David had acted when he and his companions were hungry. David went into the house of God and ate the bread of Presence, violating the law in the process, because this bread was reserved for the priests. In other words, just as David had violated the law in order to eat when hungry, so the disciples of Jesus had comparably violated the law for the same purpose. Meeting even simple human needs trumps the discipline of observing the Sabbath law of rest. Thus, as Jesus famously said, “The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27–28).

The principle of the Pharisees was that if it was not a matter of life and death, then Jesus’ disciples should have gone out of their way to keep the Sabbath holy. The principle attributed to Jesus was that keeping the Sabbath holy precisely meant meeting human need, be it hunger, health, or any other kind of wholeness. For the Pharisees, the purpose of the Sabbath was to honor God, and to do so by refraining from the normal activities of the week, whereas for Jesus honoring God on the Sabbath apparently meant attending to human needs above all else, and that this was in fact the best way to honor the God of creation. For the Pharisees, even human need should be subordinated to an even deeper human need to reverence God. For Jesus, God had created the Sabbath precisely to reverence the rejuvenation of humans and the entire creation. The Pharisees saw Jesus’ attitude

<sup>8</sup> This story is likely a somewhat idealized account of the kinds of conflicts Jesus had with the Pharisees. As E.P. Sanders has noted, “Pharisees did not organize themselves into groups to spend their Sabbaths in Galilean cornfields in the hope of catching someone transgressing”! (*Jesus and Judaism* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985], 265). However, see M. Casey, “Culture and Historicity: The Plucking of the Grain (Mark 2:23–28),” *New Testament Studies* 34 (1988): 1–23, and N.T. Wright, who argues, against Sanders, for the historical probability of the account (*Jesus and the Victory of God* [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1986], 291–294). See further J. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, 4 vols. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991–2009), vol. 3: 526–527.

<sup>9</sup> See J. Marcus, *Mark 1–8* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 240–241; A.Y. Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2007), 201–202. Philo of Alexandria, a slightly earlier contemporary of Jesus, noted that Jews did not engage in harvesting or plucking of fruit on the Sabbath. See Philo, *De Vita Mosis*, F.H. Colson, trans. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935), vol. 2: 22. See also the command in Exod. 34:21: “Six days you shall work, but on the seventh day you shall rest; even in plowing time and in harvest time you shall rest.”

to the Sabbath as fundamentally irreverent toward God. Jesus appears to have seen the Pharisees' attitude to the Sabbath as unresponsive to genuine human needs. And so he declared himself to be the authoritative interpreter of the Sabbath, tradition be damned.

This story is followed immediately by a second Sabbath controversy, this time a conflict over healing on the Sabbath (Mark 3:1–6). The venue this time is not an out-of-the-way field but the synagogue in Capernaum. The occasion involves a man with a withered hand. Mark goes out of his way to tell us that they were watching Jesus “to see whether he would cure him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him” (3:2). In the versions of Mark and Luke (Mark 3:4; Luke 6:9), Jesus asks, “[I]s it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?” In Matthew, by contrast, the Jewish leaders ask Jesus if it is lawful to heal on the Sabbath (Matt. 12:10). In response Matthew has inserted some Q material about a sheep falling into a pit on the Sabbath, and how even on the Sabbath people will lift it out of the pit (Matt. 12:11–12; see Luke 14:5). Arguing then from minor premise to major premise,<sup>10</sup> like a good rabbi, Jesus establishes that it is lawful to heal on the Sabbath, because a human being is much more valuable than a sheep. Of course in the case of the sheep it might really be a matter of life or death, whereas in the case of the man with the withered hand one can well imagine that he would have been quite fine until the day after the Sabbath. Still, the point for Jesus in all three Gospel accounts seems to be that the Sabbath is not a time to restrain from doing good, but precisely a time to restore life wherever and whenever possible – be it helping a sheep out of a pit or healing a man's withered hand. As Joel Marcus notes, “the Markan Jesus makes withholding the cure of the man's paralyzed hand, even for a few hours, tantamount to killing him, and performing the cure immediately tantamount to saving his life.”<sup>11</sup> When Jesus thus violated the Sabbath, at least as far as the Pharisees in the Gospel accounts were concerned, this was reason enough that they “went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him” (Matt. 12:14; Mark 3:6; Luke 6:11). This is the first time in the Gospels that we hear of any plot to do away with Jesus because he was breaking the Jewish law.

The Gospel of Luke has two additional Sabbath controversies, both involving healing stories. Like the account of the man with the withered

<sup>10</sup> Here Jesus is presented as employing the rabbinic exegetical principle of *qal wahomer*, from lesser premise to greater premise. See D. Daube, “Rabbinic Methods of Interpretation and Hellenistic Rhetoric,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 22 (1949): 239–264; R.N. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 6–35.

<sup>11</sup> Marcus, *Mark* 1–8, 252.

hand in Luke 6, so in Luke 13 Jesus heals a crippled woman on the Sabbath. The leader of the synagogue becomes indignant because of Jesus' action, saying, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day" (Luke 13:14). Jesus responds quickly and strongly with a rationale similar to the argument from Matthew 12:11–12 about caring for an animal on the Sabbath as justification for healing a human being on the Sabbath. Jesus' opponents were shamed by this (Luke 13:17) and Jesus again wins the Sabbath contest. Luke 14:1–6 has another Sabbath healing where the same rationale is given. Jesus healed a man on the Sabbath after asking the Pharisees if it was lawful to cure people on the Sabbath. He justifies the healing by appealing to the analogy of how even on the Sabbath anyone would (and should) pull out a child or an ox that had fallen into a well. The Sabbath thus provides all the more reason to make people whole, not less. After all, because people are not performing their regular work on the Sabbath it gives them more of an opportunity to provide aid and help to any in need.

The Sabbath controversies in the Gospel of John move along the same lines of intense disagreement over healing on the Sabbath. In John 5:1–16 Jesus heals a man who had been paralyzed for thirty-eight years. But "the Jews started persecuting Jesus, because he was doing such things on the Sabbath" (John 5:16). Jesus defends himself by answering, "My Father is still working, and I also am working" (John 5:17). This response only inflames the situation, as Jesus has so closely aligned his deeds (including his Sabbath violation) with God's deeds. Jesus is claiming that even God does not rest from such deeds on the Sabbath. "For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the Sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God" (John 5:18). How could Jesus truly be God's son if he did not even observe God's Sabbath? Since he violated the Sabbath, by extension Jesus could not be God's son.

Not only did the Sabbath violations show that Jesus was not God's son, it showed who Jesus truly was, namely, a sinner before God and before all the people. The long story of the healing of the man born blind in John 9 establishes Jesus as a sinner in the eyes of the Pharisees. In this extended drama Jesus appears only at the beginning and end of the story. Operating, as ever, between the interplay of surface and depth meanings, the Gospel of John plays with the double meaning of light and sight, contrasting the physical sensation with the spiritual perception. Jesus physically heals the man born blind, and then the man progressively comes to deeper and deeper spiritual insights as a consequence of being healed. Along the way the man is

on his own trying to explain to everyone what has happened and who healed him. He explains to his neighbors that “the man called Jesus” (9:11) healed him. The Pharisees question the man, and they are divided about Jesus. “Some of the Pharisees said, ‘This man is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath.’ But others said, ‘How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?’ And they were divided” (John 9:16–17). When they ask for the former blind man’s opinion, he responds, “He is a prophet” (9:17). The Pharisees then question the man’s parents, to make sure that he had been born blind. The parents are afraid of the Jewish leaders, who have already agreed to expel from the synagogue anyone who says Jesus is the messiah (9:22). They know this is their son and that he was born blind, but they do not know how he now sees. Then John returns to the now-sighted blind man again with a pronouncement from the Pharisees (John 9:24): “So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, ‘Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.’” Jesus’ disregard for the Sabbath law indicates that he must be a sinner, even though he seems to be doing something good. The greater good, though, is to rest from all work on the Sabbath except in cases of life and death. What prevented Jesus from waiting one day?

The formerly blind man takes exception to the Pharisees’ determination that Jesus must be a sinner. What an amazing thing, he says, that the Pharisees do not know where Jesus comes from “and yet he opened my eyes” (9:30). “If this man were not from God, he could do nothing” (9:33). And now the Pharisees pronounce judgment on the man as well. If he wants to side with Jesus, so be it. He too falls under the condemnation of sin: “‘You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?’ And they drove him out” (John 9:34). The story ends with Jesus finding the man again, after he has been cast out. Jesus reveals himself as the “Son of Man” (John 9:35), and the man confesses his belief and worships Jesus (John 9:35–38). At this point the depth meaning of the story becomes clear. The Pharisees may have physical sight, but they are spiritually blind. They are so confident of their ability to “see” the meaning of the Sabbath law that they ironically sin in the process. They are the sinners, according to John, not Jesus. “Jesus said to them, ‘If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains’” (John 9:41). Where does sin reside? With Jesus or with the Pharisees? For John, of course, Jesus can do no wrong because he comes from God and leads believers to God. For the Pharisees, however, things are not so simple. How can a person who claims to come from God act and teach in a way that contradicts such an important commandment in scripture as observance of the Sabbath? What kind of God would send such a

person? And so they conclude that Jesus must not come from God, for they know that their scriptures and laws come from God. Therefore, Jesus must be a sinner. And sinners are not to be dealt with lightly, especially those who claim to be leading people to God.

#### SINS OF THE TABLE

We have already described Jesus' questionable table fellowship and the charge that he was guilty of eating with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus garnered both notoriety and dismissal for this behavior. But it was not only with *whom* Jesus ate that caused a problem; it was also *what* and *how* he ate that was deemed at variance with God's commands. The food laws of first-century Judaism were an important identity marker for all Jews. The Jewish law spelled out which foods were permitted and which foods were not permitted. If there were disputes about what could be eaten, the rabbis engaged in significant discussion and debate to arrive at a consensus. The laws of *kashrut* (keeping kosher) developed over the years. In general, as stipulated in Leviticus 11:3 and Deuteronomy 14:6, any animal may be eaten that has cloven hooves and chews its cud. As for seafood, only that which has fins and scales may be eaten (Lev. 11:9; Deut. 14:9). Chicken and other poultry are typically considered kosher (some rabbis rule out turkey; see Lev. 11:13–19). And the rabbis interpreted Deuteronomy 14:21 to indicate that meat and dairy products should not be eaten together ("You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk"). The laws of the kosher table are, of course, much more complicated than this.<sup>12</sup> The method of killing and butchering an animal is also important, so that as much blood as possible is drained, because the blood belongs to God (Lev. 17:14).

So why is any of this a problem for Jesus? Most likely Jesus observed the food laws, as did most Jews. But two issues in particular did arise: washing hands before the meal, and the tradition that Jesus declared all foods clean. The key passage for all of this is Mark 7:1–23, with parallels in Matthew 15:1–20. Scholars often appeal to Mark 7 to demonstrate that the audience of Mark's Gospel included at least a significant group of Gentile Christians around the time of the Jewish War of 66–70 CE. Mark 7 begins by stating how some scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem noticed that some of

<sup>12</sup> See R.J. Karris, "The Realia of Food and Drink During the Time of Jesus and Luke," in Karris, *Eating Your Way Through Luke's Gospel* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006), 3–12; see also M. Broshi, "The Diet of Palestine in the Roman Period," in his *Bread, Wine, Walls, and Scrolls* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 121–143.

Jesus' disciples were "eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them" (Mark 7:2). Following immediately on this is an explanatory note for the reader from the author, an editorial aside about the Jewish practice of washing hands before eating (Mark 7:3–4):

For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.

No Jew, of course, would need to be given this information. Only Gentiles unfamiliar with the Jewish custom of washing hands, among other traditions of washing, would need to be told any of this. This account, then, represents a much later comment added to an earlier story about the disciples of Jesus not washing their hands before eating.

The Pharisees and scribes then ask Jesus (Mark 7:5): "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" The reference to "the tradition of the elders" is a way of invoking the oral law of the Pharisees, which was considered binding interpretation of the written law. Though not all Jews lived according to this custom, enough did that it was not an unfair question.<sup>13</sup> It appears that the Pharisees took over the practice of hand-washing from the Levitical law for the priests before they offered a sacrifice: "[W]hen they [Aaron and his sons] go into the tent of meeting, or when they come near the altar to minister, to make an offering by fire to the Lord, they shall wash with water, so that they may not die. They shall wash their hands and their feet, so that they may not die: it shall be a perpetual ordinance for them, for him and for his descendants throughout their generations" (Exod. 30:20–21). The idea of sacralizing a meal as if it were a sacrifice offered by a priest to God appears to have been a tradition that the Pharisees developed in order to show greater reverence toward God, so that every Jewish home should become an imitation of the Temple, at least symbolically.<sup>14</sup> Here we see how interwoven are the issues of purity, meals, Temple worship, priestly sacrifice, and Pharisaic piety. To transgress one raised concerns about all.

Jesus touched on all by discounting the significance of the tradition of hand-washing before a meal. His critique is sharp, beginning with an appeal

<sup>13</sup> See Marcus, *Mark* 1–8, 440–442.

<sup>14</sup> Marcus, *Mark* 1–8, 449; Collins, *Mark*, 344–349. See also Luke 11:38, where a Pharisee who is hosting Jesus at table "was amazed to see that he did not first wash before dinner."



to Isaiah that indicts the Pharisees as hypocrites: “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me” (Mark 7:6; Isa. 29:13). Jesus then contrasts the practice of hand-washing as mere human tradition over against “the commandment of God,” which he accuses them of having abandoned (Mark 7:8–9). Having criticized the Pharisees, Mark has Jesus turn and address the crowd: “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile” (Mark 7:14–15). The issue of hand-washing is really a question about purity, impurity, and what brings about defilement. Following the pattern of the priests, the Pharisees saw a connection between external and internal purity; if one ingests something impure, then it defiles and renders one impure, disqualified from truly worshiping God as God has commanded. But Jesus poses a radical challenge to the entire system. Nothing external to a person can defile; only that which is in the heart can defile when it comes out. Purity is a matter of spirit, not of physical matter. And so it fundamentally does not matter if one washes one’s hands or not before eating.

This leads to the second issue, the keeping of kosher food laws. After having Jesus declare that “whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters not the heart but the stomach” (Mark 7:18–19), Mark then makes another editorial comment even more important than the editorial explanation of Jewish customs regarding hand-washing. In Mark 7:19 the author of the Gospel of Mark gives us his interpretation of the import of Jesus’ saying in 7:18, “Thus he declared all foods clean.” This is a radical statement that certainly expresses the reality of at least a significant part of the early Christian movement toward the last third of the first century CE. And it finds confirmation in the account from Acts 10 regarding Peter’s vision or dream:

He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, “Get up, Peter; kill and eat.” But Peter said, “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.” The voice said to him again, a second time, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” (Acts 10:11–15)

Luke most likely wrote about Peter’s vision in the 80s or 90s of the first century CE. While it clearly reflects a later development, when the kosher food laws had largely ceased to function within an increasingly Gentile Christian church, this development really does appear to be an outgrowth

of Jesus' earlier teaching regarding what does and does not defile. Nonkosher food, in this view, cannot render a person unclean; nor can kosher food make a person pure. By challenging the kosher food laws in this way, Jesus showed himself to be not only violating the oral traditions that had come about, but also in principle violating the written law regarding unclean food. Peter's vision seems to be grounded legitimately in Jesus' teaching here.<sup>15</sup> At least the earliest Christians (Jewish and Gentile Christians alike) saw continuity with the teaching (and practice?) of Jesus.

One final comment on the "sins of the table" has to do with Matthew's version of this whole story. Addressing a primarily Jewish-Christian (or Christian-Jewish) audience, Matthew does not need Mark's explanation of Jewish custom. Nor does Matthew need or want Mark's declaration that all foods were now clean. Given that Matthew uses Mark as a literary source, then, Matthew has made significant changes in this story. And in light of Jesus' statement in Matthew 5:18 that "not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished," Matthew's Jesus would be hard pressed indeed to do away with the food laws, especially given their importance as Jewish boundary markers. Matthew's Jesus further warns in 5:19 that "whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven." We should expect, then, that Matthew would modify his source from Mark 7 in significant ways.

Matthew has sharpened the story in order to highlight Jesus' (and Matthew's) harsh critique of the Pharisees (to get even harsher in Matt. 23). Matthew's version of the story heightens Jesus' intense conflict with the Pharisees. Only in Matthew's account do we see the Pharisees offended (*skandalizomai*), along with Jesus' response implying that God will uproot them because they are blind guides. On the other hand, Matthew deletes Mark's editorial comment that Jesus had declared all foods clean. Matthew's Jesus knows nothing of this, and would clearly oppose any such move on the part of the Christian (Jewish-Christian) community. Still, the main point remains, that eating with unwashed hands does not defile. While Mark interprets this to mean that there is no longer any such thing as kosher and nonkosher food (which Luke follows in his story from Acts 10), Matthew sees no connection between eating with unwashed hands and doing away

<sup>15</sup> So R. Booth, *Jesus and the Laws of Purity: Tradition History and Legal History in Mark 7* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1986); see W. Loader, "Mark 7:1–23 and the Historical Jesus," *Colloquium* 30:2 (1998): 123–151.

with the laws regarding kosher food. The food laws obviously still apply, for Matthew.<sup>16</sup> But the Pharisaic tradition mandating the washing of hands before a meal, according to Matthew, does not follow. Defilement comes from within, not from without. Ritual observance of the law must be subordinated to moral observance of the law. Jesus' challenge of the Pharisaic adaptation of the oral law about washing of hands makes it clear that the moral standing of one's heart is far more important than the ritual standing of one's hands.<sup>17</sup> It is not clear that the Pharisees would have disagreed with this assessment of the relative importance of moral and ritual purity. But they may well have wondered why one could not attend to both at once, especially since both were commanded in Scripture. Had ritual scruples become such a problem that in Jesus' view the situation required dramatic prophetic critique, in both word and deed? Was Jesus concerned that the righteous were becoming sinfully self-righteous at the expense of societal and religious outcasts? Was Jesus' embrace of sinners tantamount to Hosea's marriage to a prostitute, a prophetic embrace of the sinner to shame the would-be righteous? Did Jesus transgress the food laws in order to call attention to a different understanding of sin? And if so, how did Jesus square all of this with his violation of the Jewish law? How would Jesus' abrogation of the law lead to a correct understanding of the law and its embodiment? We will return to these questions at the end of the chapter.

### "SINS" OF IMPURITY

The issue of washing hands before a meal in relation to what I have termed "sins of the table" could just as well be covered under the category of "sins of impurity," because the concern involves eating in a ritually defiled manner not in keeping with what it means to be God's holy people. And so again we are reminded that the observance of Jewish law is highly integrated and defies neat categorization. It is important to point out that the very label "sins of impurity" is in most respects a contradiction in terms. Impurity did not, by and large, have anything to do with sin per se. Impurity became a function of sin only when one intentionally engaged in action that required ritual purity (e.g., making an offering at the Jerusalem Temple), but did so in a state of ritual impurity.

<sup>16</sup> See D. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 231.

<sup>17</sup> The subordination of ritual law to moral law lies at the heart of the passage, according to U. Luz, *Matthew 8–20* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg/Fortress, 2001), 327–335.

To understand better the issues associated with “sins of impurity,” a brief overview of the Jewish ritual purity system will be helpful.<sup>18</sup> Ritual purity has everything to do with approaching God in an appropriate manner, especially within the context of worship (in the broadest sense of the term). Because God is holy, God’s people must make special preparations in order to worship God in a way that is analogously holy. Because God is sacred, worship must be sacred. Worship space must be set apart from regular space, hence the Temple and its increasing degrees of holiness the further in one moves, culminating in the Holy of Holies, which the High Priest entered only once a year in observance of the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur. Worship time must be set apart from regular time, hence the Sabbath. Ritual has to do with establishing formal mechanisms overseen by religious experts to make sure that the people’s interaction with God is in keeping with the faith community’s collective understanding of what God desires and requires. Ritual purity is all about setting oneself apart from the normal affairs of life in order to attend to God in a manner befitting humans approaching the Creator of the Universe. To be in the presence of the divine without being completely overwhelmed requires special care, for the holiness of God is virtually unbearable for sinful humanity. So holy is God that God’s name must never be uttered, or even written out in full. Thus we often find circumlocutions (literally, “talking around”) for the divine name. YHWH becomes Y””H, and when encountered in a text that is read aloud, the word *Adonai* (Lord) is substituted. Thus we see a buffering of the relationship between God and God’s people, in which many intermediary functions are used effectively to honor the people’s relationship with God as one of deep reverence and awe.

To demonstrate proper deference to and reverence for God, the Torah spells out a significant number of laws regarding ritual purity, especially in the book of Leviticus. There is no need to go into detail here regarding the

<sup>18</sup> See H. Maccoby, *Ritual and Morality: The Ritual Purity System and Its Place in Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); C. Hayes, *Gentile Impurities and Jewish Identities: Intermarriage and Impurity in Ancient Jewish Sources* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); J. Klawans, *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); J. Klawans, *Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple: Symbolism and Supersessionism in the Study of Ancient Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge, 2002; originally published in 1966); T. Kazen, *Jesus and Purity Halakhah: Was Jesus Indifferent to Impurity?* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2002); J.D.G. Dunn, “Jesus and Purity: An Ongoing Debate,” *NTS* 48 (2002): 449–467; J. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1998); and J. Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 4: *Law and Love* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 415–426.

vast scope of the laws of ritual purity, but a few aspects are especially pertinent to our present discussion. First, to be in a state of ritual impurity was not sinful; it simply meant that one needed to purify oneself before engaging in an activity (particularly in relation to the Jerusalem Temple) that required ritual purity. As E.P. Sanders and others have noted,<sup>19</sup> it is likely that most people were ritually impure much of the time as a result of the simple course of life. One attained impurity by touching a dead person, but one was obviously obligated to touch a dead person when dealing with dead relatives and burial preparations. One attained impurity through any bodily emission, such as a flow of menstrual blood or the ejaculation of semen during sexual intercourse. Skin diseases, such as leprosy, rendered one impure and created a more difficult situation with which to deal because they were not temporary conditions. Most forms of impurity, however, were temporary. And for all forms of impurity there were clear procedures by which one could again attain ritual purity. Most of these procedures involved waiting and/or washing. So, for example, regarding corpse impurity, Numbers 19:11–14 stipulates:

Those who touch the dead body of any human being shall be unclean seven days.

They shall purify themselves with the water on the third day and on the seventh day, and so be clean; but if they do not purify themselves on the third day and on the seventh day, they will not become clean. All who touch a corpse, the body of a human being who has died, and do not purify themselves, defile the tabernacle of the LORD; such persons shall be cut off from Israel. Since water for cleansing was not dashed on them, they remain unclean; their uncleanness is still on them. This is the law when someone dies in a tent: everyone who comes into the tent, and everyone who is in the tent, shall be unclean seven days.

Touching a dead body was considered a pollution of a living body, and it brought about ritual impurity for seven days. Purification rites are spelled out: purify with water on the third and seventh day, and then one becomes clean, purified, ready to participate again in the ritual life of Israel. Even though the human corpse is the greatest source of impurity, and causes the most widespread contagion of impurity, there are clear purification rituals that will cleanse the person or persons so affected.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> *Judaism: Practice and Belief*, 63 BCE–66 CE.

<sup>20</sup> See the discussion on corpse impurity in H. Maccoby, *Ritual and Morality: The Ritual Purity System and Its Place in Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1–29.

Jesus contracted corpse impurity on several occasions. In Luke 7:14 Jesus touches the bier on which a dead man was being carried out of the town of Nain for burial. The man was a widow's only son. Jesus had compassion, touched the bier, and said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" He sat up, and Jesus gave him to his mother. (This miracle story mimics the account of Elijah raising from the dead the only son of a widow in 1 Kings 17.) In John 11 we find the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Though the text never states explicitly that Jesus touched Lazarus before or after Jesus called him back to life, Jesus does tell others to unbind him. Further, in the parable of the Good Samaritan from Luke 10, the story hinges on the appearance of the beaten man as though he were dead. The priest and the Levite pass by the half-dead man, even going to the other side, perhaps seeking to avoid corpse impurity – but even then without excuse.<sup>21</sup>

The story from Mark 5:1–20 tells of a man with an unclean spirit who lived among the tombs, among the dead, and that nobody could restrain him. After Jesus casts the legion of demons into a herd of swine, the herd proceeds to run down a steep bank into the sea and drowns. The association of Jesus with corpses is more indirect here, but present nonetheless. Finally, in the story that follows (Mark 5:21–43), Jesus is sought out by Jairus, a leader in the synagogue, to come and heal his young daughter, who is near death. But Jesus is delayed, and by the time he arrives the daughter has died. He takes her by the hand and tells her to get up, which she immediately does. Again, although the corpse impurity here is not as obvious as in the case of the man being carried out for burial in Luke 7, still the association between Jesus and the dead stands out. Of course, Mark's point is that Jesus' encounter with the dead girl in fact leads her to new life. Rather than the girl conferring corpse impurity onto Jesus, Jesus' healing power is presented as conferring life back into the dead girl.<sup>22</sup> Far from avoiding corpse impurity, Jesus is presented as simply ignoring it.

Another form of impurity that Jesus contracts involves ritual impurity acquired from contact with a person with bodily emissions. The most telling case in this regard is the story of the woman with the flow of blood (Mark 5:25–34), the story around which the narrative of Jairus' daughter is woven. Because the woman has had a flow of blood for many years, she has been in a state of ritual impurity for a long time.<sup>23</sup> She also is a source of ritual defilement for anyone with whom she comes into physical contact. It should

<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., J. Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34* (Waco, TX: Word, 1993), 592–597.

<sup>22</sup> See Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 367.

<sup>23</sup> See H. Maccoby, "The Sources of Impurity: Menstruation," in *Ritual and Morality*, 30–46.

be emphasized again that none of this involves sin. The only sin would be knowingly to have contact with this woman and then to go to the Temple without first going through the appropriate process of ritual purification. Significantly, Jesus does not actively touch her; instead, she touches him, whereupon Jesus feels power flow from him, as the woman feels her hemorrhage stop and her body healed. She still will need to go through the purification rites, but at least now she can do so and rejoin the worshipping community.

Beyond this story, we also have the account of Jesus touching and healing a leper in Mark 1:40–45 (see Matt. 8:1–4; Luke 5:12–13). The status of a leper was one of serious ritual impurity. The legislation from Leviticus 13:45–46 makes the tragic fate of a leper all too clear: “The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean.’ He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.” Those suffering from leprosy were generally regarded as though they were, in effect, living corpses – alive, but dead to the community of faith. Touching a leper brought about the same kind of corpse impurity that resulted from touching a dead body.<sup>24</sup> As with the woman with the flow of blood, so with the leper – through touch Jesus is rendered ritually impure, but at the same time the leper is rendered ritually clean. This transfer of purity status again shows Jesus subordinating ritual purity to larger societal inclusion of outcasts within the community of faith.

The version of this story from Luke 5 significantly highlights Jesus’ admonition to the healed leper to go and “show yourself to the priest, and, as Moses commanded, make an offering for your cleansing, for a testimony to them” (5:14; see parallels in Matt. 8:4 and Mark 1:44). Jesus is portrayed as following the legal traditions that would lead to the restoration of the leper to the community. Similarly, in Luke 17:11–14 Jesus heals several lepers and tells them to go and show themselves to the priests so that they would no longer be treated as leprous outcasts.

The problem with Jesus’ approach to the purity laws was not that he was often ritually impure, which he no doubt was. There was a relatively simple process for reattaining ritual purity. The problem is that Jesus did not go out

<sup>24</sup> See Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 207–209. See also Job 18:13 and J. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16: A Book of Rituals and Ethics* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2004), 819. Even though Jesus did not in any strict sense violate the law in this passage, and demonstrates his respect for the law by telling the man to go and show himself to a priest, “he is still treading on dangerous ground by venturing into the realm of impurity through deliberate contact with an unclean person” (Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 210).

of his way to avoid incurring unnecessary ritual impurity, nor did he practice the stricter oral tradition of the Pharisees by, for example, washing his hands before a meal. Jesus thus came across as relativizing and relaxing the purity laws. This relaxing of the laws of ritual purity led directly to Jesus' offense against the Jerusalem Temple.

#### SINS AGAINST THE TEMPLE

By relativizing the purity laws Jesus could well be accused of contributing to the violation of proper worship in the Temple, for a lax attitude in observing the purity laws could in turn lead to a comparably lax attitude in the observance of the regulations regarding ritual purity in Temple worship. Perceptions shape judgments, and those who perceived Jesus as relaxing purity laws had reason to be suspicious about Jesus' attitude toward the Temple as well. Still, the issue of purity was certainly not the biggest problem that the Jewish religious authorities had with Jesus in relation to the Jerusalem Temple. Nor do issues of purity appear to be the main problem that Jesus had with the regulation of Temple worship. But before considering the conflict between Jesus and the Temple authorities, it is important to see some of the positive ways in which Jesus regarded the Temple and Temple worship.

As we saw above, Mark 1:40–45 (see also Matt. 8:2–4 and Luke 5:12–16) presents the story of Jesus healing a leper, making him clean. When Jesus sent the man away, he told him: “See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them” (Mark 1:44). Significantly, Jesus is presented here as affirming the practice detailed in Leviticus 14 regarding the process for declaring a leper clean. The procedure was relatively elaborate, time-consuming, and potentially costly. If followed according to the letter of the law, “this shall be the ritual for the leprous person at the time of his cleansing” (Lev. 14:2):

- The priest would inspect the person to make sure the leprosy was gone (Lev. 14:3).
- Two birds would be brought for the one to be cleansed (Lev. 14:4).
- One bird would be slaughtered over a vessel of fresh water (Lev. 14:5).
- The living bird would be dipped into the blood of the slaughtered bird (Lev. 14:6).
- Seven times the priest would sprinkle the blood on the person (with the living bird?), pronounce him clean, and release the living bird (Lev. 14:7).



- The one being cleansed then washed his clothing, shaved off all his hair, and bathed himself. But he still must remain “outside the camp” of the people for seven days (Lev. 14:8–9).
- On the eighth day, the one being cleansed took two unblemished male lambs, and one ewe lamb, as well as a grain offering, and presented it all to the priest, who offered one of the lambs (Lev. 14:12–13).
- Again blood manipulation is involved, as the priest “shall take some of the blood of the guilt offering and put it on the lobe of the right ear of the one to be cleansed, and on the thumb of the right hand, and on the big toe of the right foot” (Lev. 14:14–16).

The event of Jesus healing the leper took place in or around Capernaum, or perhaps elsewhere in Galilee (Mark 1:21, 35). To show himself to a priest the ex-leper would have had to seek out a local priest. Priests were situated all over Israel, and when not on duty in the Jerusalem Temple for their brief term of service, they were consulted about many matters of religious law in local towns and villages.<sup>25</sup> After being declared clean by a local priest, the leper would have to travel from Galilee to Jerusalem in order to make the appropriate sacrifices in the Temple. If the person was poor and could not afford so much, “he shall take one male lamb for a guilt offering to be elevated, to make atonement on his behalf, and one-tenth of an ephah of choice flour mixed with oil for a grain offering and a log of oil; also two turtledoves or two pigeons” (Lev. 14:21). In this way the person would be officially declared clean, sealed by the ritual ceremony of sacrifice and sprinkling/anointing. That Jesus is shown telling the cleansed leper to follow the law of Moses, and so be reinstated to the people, indicates that Jesus upheld the Mosaic law that stipulated the involvement of priest and Temple sacrifice. That the leper in fact did not do what Jesus said, at least in regard to being quiet about the healing, does not diminish Jesus’ instructions for the man to follow the appropriate ritual law regarding the cleansing of a leper.

Beyond this story, the Gospel of John in particular goes out of its way to show Jesus going up to Jerusalem for various pilgrimage feasts: Passover three times (John 2:13, 23; 6:4; 11:55; 12:1; 13:1; 18:28), the feast of booths (John 7:2), the feast of dedication (John 10:22), and – presumably – a number of others. Beyond his reported presence in the Jerusalem Temple as a twelve-year-old boy who had to be in “his Father’s house” (Luke 2:46), Jesus is also shown teaching regularly in the Temple: “Every day he was teaching in the temple, and at night he would go out and spend the night on the Mount of

<sup>25</sup> See especially Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief*, 63 BCE–66 CE, 47–145.

Olives” (Luke 21:37; Matt. 21:23; 24:1; John 7:14, 28; 8:2, 20). When he was put on trial, Jesus objects: “Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me” (Matt. 26:55; Mark 14:49; Luke 19:47; 20:1; 22:53; John 18:20). Matthew also reports that “the blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them” (Matt. 21:14). At the end of Luke’s Gospel and the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles, we also find the disciples “continually in the temple blessing God” (Luke 24:53; Acts 2:46; 3:1; 5:1, 42). Jesus clearly was remembered as being a frequent visitor to the Temple when he was in Jerusalem.

And yet one of the clear accusations against Jesus was that he spoke against the Temple. “This fellow said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God and to build it in three days’” (Matt. 26:61; 27:40; Mark 14:58; John 2:19). This accusation seems to dovetail with one of the prominent teachings of Jesus regarding the coming apocalyptic destruction of the Temple: “As Jesus came out of the temple and was going away, his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. Then he asked them, ‘You see all these, do you not? Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down’” (Matt. 24:1–2; Mark 13:1–2; Luke 21:5–6). More important than these mere words, of course, is Jesus’ prophetic action in the Temple, much debated, when he went into the Temple and caused a commotion, the so-called cleansing of the Temple scene (Matt. 21:12–13; Mark 11:15–17; Luke 19:45–46; John 2:13–22):

Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’; but you are making it a den of robbers.”

The Gospel of John, which has this scene near the beginning of his Gospel rather than near the end (as in the Synoptics), portrays an even more dramatic scene: “Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables” (John 2:15). The action of overturning the tables of the money changers and causing a general ruckus is given a commentary on the lips of Jesus from a combination of citations from Isaiah 56:7 (“my house shall be called a house of prayer”) and Jeremiah 7:11 (“Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight?”).

How should we understand this prophetic action by Jesus? Clearly it was understood by the Jewish authorities as threatening the proper conduct of

worship and sacrifice that was required by the law. But prophetic critique of the Temple cult was certainly nothing new. In Jesus' day the Essenes had such serious problems with the regulation of the Temple that they withdrew into the wilderness to establish their own eschatological community in anticipation of a royal and a priestly messiah who would purify and restore the Temple to its proper place.<sup>26</sup> And long before Jesus the prophets of old had criticized Israel's worship of God through cultic sacrifice at the expense of the poor. Perhaps the most famous oracle of judgment comes from the eighth-century prophet Amos:

I hate, I despise your festivals,  
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.  
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,  
I will not accept them;  
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals  
I will not look upon.  
Take away from me the noise of your songs;  
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.  
But let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:21–24)

So what was Jesus' talk about the destruction of the Temple all about? And how did his prophetic actions go together with his prophetic speech? All we have, of course, is what the Gospel writers tell us about what Jesus did or said, so getting back to the actual events is difficult at best. In any case our interest runs more along the lines of how the early Christians remembered and portrayed Jesus than in what we as historians can say with any kind of certainty.

It appears that we can say several things about Jesus' actions against the money-changers and the people selling sacrificial animals in the Temple precincts. One possibility is that Jesus was criticizing the emphasis on proper observance as opposed to heartfelt prayer. Or perhaps Jesus was bothered by the sometime rank commercialism that inevitably arises alongside of, and is even sponsored through, almost all holy sites. Another possibility is that Jesus was opposed to the sacrificial cult in principle, though this seems unlikely given that he says nothing against sacrifices per se, and even tells a cleansed leper to make the appropriate offerings after getting the approval of

<sup>26</sup> See, e.g., B. Gärtner, *The Temple and the Community in Qumran and the New Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 4–46.

a priest. The most likely scenario, however, is one that has become something of a scholarly consensus, namely, that Jesus' action in the Temple was a symbolic prophetic action that fit within his own apocalyptic worldview regarding the coming end of the age, one sign of which would be the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, likely with a new Jerusalem and a new Temple on the horizon. Jesus' own overturning of money-changing tables and the seats of those selling doves would have been understood as a symbolic and proleptic enactment of the destruction of the Temple.<sup>27</sup> The Gospel of Mark's framing of the Temple scene (Mark 11:15–19) with the cursing (Mark 11:12–14) and the withering (Mark 11:20–25) of the fruitless fig tree is a further symbolic comment from Mark about the current Temple worship/sacrifice as similarly fruitless. Israel would be restored and redeemed, but only through great conflict and conflagration. A firestorm was brewing; there would be terrible eschatological woes (Mark 13) and tremendous suffering. In the end, though, God would prevail. Even though things were dire at present, God would bring all things to fruition in God's good time.

But had not God commanded that sacrifices be offered in the Temple? Had not God required that the Temple be a place of holiness, not contaminated by ritual impurities, as articulated in the written and oral law, nor by anything smacking of Gentile presence (such as Roman coins with the idolatrous image of the emperor)? Over against God's sacred ordinances Jesus came across as violating what God had commanded of Israel in relation to Temple worship. By overturning the money-changing tables Jesus was getting in the way of the sacrificial cult that was being observed in accordance with the Mosaic law. The responsible religious authorities who oversaw the worship of God in the Temple rightly viewed Jesus as speaking against the Temple. All the more galling was that he was doing it in the name of God. Jesus was not just dangerous in regard to Sabbath observance, proper table fellowship, or upholding the laws of purity, from the perspective of the Jewish leaders. Now he was striking at the heart of Jewish faith and practice by attacking the Temple. There was only one greater transgression, one further sin, which pushed everything and everybody over the edge: Jesus the blasphemer.

<sup>27</sup> See Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 61–76; E.P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (New York: Penguin Press, 1993), 253–262; Marcus, *Mark 8–16*, 781–796; Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 636–640; Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 413–428; G. Theissen and A. Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1998), 431–433; P. Fredricksen, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews* (New York: Knopf, 1999), 207–212; and B. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 211–214.

## SINS AGAINST GOD: BLASPHEMY

“Blasphemy” refers to grossly offensive speech or actions against God or against what particular believers think God would find a serious profanation of the sacred, as expressed in their sacred texts and traditions. One of the last, and most celebrated, cases of someone being accused and tried for blasphemy in a public forum occurred in late nineteenth-century England. A freethinker by the name of George William Foote (1850–1915) was put on trial for blasphemy in 1882 after publishing a number of cartoons about Jesus in a periodical Foote edited, *The Freethinker*, that were considered scandalous.<sup>28</sup> Foote ended up being convicted of blasphemy and was sentenced to a year in prison by a Roman Catholic judge, Justice North.<sup>29</sup>

In more recent times we can point to two popular films that caused significant scandal, including charges of blasphemy, especially in the Christian sphere. The 1979 film *Life of Brian*, by members of the British comedy troupe Monty Python, was considered blasphemous for its parallel presentation of Brian as a Christ figure. Included in the film was a scene about someone being stoned to death for the crime of blasphemy (slightly edited here):

JEWISH	Matthias, son of Deuteronomy of Gath. You have been found guilty
OFFICIAL	by the elders of the town of uttering the name of our Lord, and so, as a blasphemer . . . you are to be stoned to death.
MATTHIAS	Look. I– I’d had a lovely supper, and all I said to my wife was, “That piece of halibut was good enough for Jehovah.”
OFFICIAL	Blasphemy! You’re only making it worse for yourself!
MATTHIAS	Making it worse?! How could it be worse?! Jehovah! Jehovah! Jehovah!

Another film, Martin Scorsese’s *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), caused even more of a scandal, both because of Scorsese’s stature as a film director and because this was a serious film as opposed to the *Life of Brian* comedy. The film was based on Nikos Kazantzakis’ controversial and highly regarded 1951 novel of the same name. Paul Schrader’s screenplay presents Jesus as a

<sup>28</sup> For the offensive cartoons published by Foote, see G.W. Foote, ed., *Comic Bible Sketches Reprinted from The Freethinker*, part 1 (London, 1885).

<sup>29</sup> See G.W. Foote, *Prisoner for Blasphemy* (London: Progressive Publishing, 1886). See further A. Cabantous, *Blasphemy: Impious Speech in the West from the Seventeenth to the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), especially 9–21 on “A Sin’s Meaning,” and D. Nash, *Blasphemy in the Christian World: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). See also L.W. Levy, *Treason Against God: A History of the Offense of Blasphemy* (New York: Schocken, 1981), and L.W. Levy, *Blasphemy: Verbal Offense Against the Sacred, from Moses to Salmon Rushdie* (New York: Knopf, 1993).

tormented soul, seeking to do God's will but causing much scandal in the process. In the scene where Jesus overturns the money-changing tables in the temple, the following exchange takes place primarily between Jesus and a priest:

PRIEST        Nazarene, what are you doing?  
 JESUS         God doesn't need a grand house. He doesn't need  
                   cyprus and bloody animals. He doesn't need shekels.  
 PRIEST        You expect people to pay the tax in Roman coins?  
                   They have images of false gods on them. You want pagan  
                   gods in the temple? All foreign coins have to be changed  
                   to shekels. That is the law.  
 JESUS         I abolish the law. I give a new law and a new hope!  
 PRIEST        What, did God change his mind about the old law?  
 JESUS         (exasperated)  
                   No, no. He just thinks our hearts are ready now to hold more.  
 PRIEST        (not listening)  
                   This chaos is your new law? How can you presume. . .  
 JESUS         How can I presume? Because I am the fulfillment of the  
                   old law and the beginning of the new.  
 SADDUCEE    (shocked)  
                   Watch what you're saying.  
                   (Peter, becoming concerned with the drift of this argument,  
                   whispers to Jesus.)  
 PETER         Maybe we should go. . .  
                   (Jesus pushes him away.)  
 JESUS         When I say, "I," Rabbi, I am saying "God."  
 PRIEST        That's blasphemy!  
 JESUS         Didn't you hear? I'm the Saint of Blasphemy!

Scorsese himself, who had at one time studied for the Roman Catholic priesthood, commented regarding the depiction of Jesus in the film: "He believes he is the worst sinner in the world. I felt that this was something I could relate to: this was a Jesus you could sit down with, have dinner or a drink with."<sup>30</sup> This emphasis on the radical humanity of a Jesus, who even to the end cannot quite figure out what God wants of him (in contrast to the faithful Judas), drew many accusations that the film was blasphemous, and not only for having a sex scene between Jesus and Mary Magdalene.<sup>31</sup> That Scorsese was intent on showing an overtly sinful Jesus and that he was willing to undercut the iconography of Jesus in film led to the controversy

<sup>30</sup> D. Thompson and I. Christie, eds., *Scorsese on Scorsese* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990), 117.

<sup>31</sup> See R. Riley, *Faith, Film, and Cultural Conflict: The Case of Martin Scorsese's The Last Temptation of Christ* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003).

and allegations of blasphemy. Scorsese's sacrifice of the divine Christ on the altar of a human Jesus was scandalous precisely because it challenged the very heart of Christian theological convictions about Jesus.

Certainly the most serious charge against Jesus in his day was that he committed blasphemy by making himself equal to God (John 5:18). And in the Gospel of John this is an accurate charge. Of course, from John's perspective the identification of Jesus with God also happens to be true. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God" (John 1:1). But in the trial of Jesus before the Jewish Sanhedrin, even the Synoptic Gospels have Jesus utter what would be considered blasphemous statements that warranted condemnation. When, according to Mark, false statements against Jesus disagreed regarding the charge that Jesus threatened to destroy the Temple, and so no capital offense was found (Mark 14:58–59), the high priest asked him directly, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" In response, with clear borrowing from Psalm 110 and Daniel 7, the Markan Jesus says: "I am; and 'you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power,' and 'coming with the clouds of heaven'" (Mark 14:62). The original Greek text of this response is in some doubt, as various manuscripts have Jesus say, "You have said that I am" (*sy eipas hoti ego eimi*), rather than the simple affirmative "I am."<sup>32</sup> This more indirect response fits better with Matthew's and Luke's use of this passage from Mark, both of which state, "You have said that I am" (Matt. 26:64 and Luke 22:70, with a plural "you" in Luke). Further, as Joel Marcus points out, early Christian scribes tended not to obscure clear Christological declarations but to clarify Christological statements that were not explicit. Thus, it makes more sense that the transmission of the text would have gone from "You have said that I am" to "I am," rather than the other way around.<sup>33</sup> The more direct and overt Christological affirmation likely comes slightly later. Scribes were not afraid to make minor "improvements" on the text during their task of copying from one manuscript to another.<sup>34</sup>

Still, even if the Markan text has Jesus responding with "You have said that I am," the continuation of Jesus' saying clearly speaks about a "Son of Man," Jesus' typical self-referent in the Gospels, seated at the right hand of God and coming with the clouds of heaven. Two motifs find expression here,

<sup>32</sup> See the discussion in Marcus, *Mark 8–16*, 1005–1008. <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 1005.

<sup>34</sup> See especially B. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), and K. Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters: Literacy, Power, and the Transmitters of Early Christian Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

enthronement and eschatological judgment. The enthronement motif picks up on Psalm 110 as a proof text used by early Christians to connect their belief in the resurrection of Jesus to their scriptures. Psalm 110:1 states, “The Lord says to my lord, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.’” Who are the two “lords”? In the Hebrew original the first “Lord” is clearly God, since the divine name (YHWH) is used. The second “lord” is *adoni*, which can mean “my lord” as in referring to a human being in a position of authority. The Septuagint version renders both of the Hebrew terms (YHWH and *adoni*) into Greek as *kyrios* (lord), which was a common translation for the Hebrew *adoni* and was a way of referring to God. So it cannot be “God” said to “God,” unless God is talking to Godself. Thus in early Christian tradition this passage became a classic text that was seen as referring to “God” said to “my Lord,” namely, Christ, the Messiah, a.k.a. Jesus.<sup>35</sup> This enthronement or exaltation motif expressed a connection between God and Jesus that was blasphemous to the Jewish leaders, for how could a human being arrogate himself to such a position as presuming to be God’s “right-hand man”? Not even Moses was accorded such a position. But to the early Christians, the resurrection was evidence of precisely such an enthronement (see Rom. 1:1–7).

The second motif, the eschatological coming of the “Son of Man” (again, viewed as the risen Christ) was equally important and was drawn from Daniel 7:13, where the prophet has the following vision: “As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being [literally, Son of Man – Greek, *hyios anthropou*] coming with the clouds of heaven.”<sup>36</sup> And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him.” Daniel 7:14 was clearly understood and invoked with the reference to Daniel 7:13, “To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him.” In short, the exalted Christ who sits at the right hand of God in heaven is coming shortly to finish what he started before he was so abruptly interrupted by crucifixion, to bring God’s judgment on all nations and to vindicate those who had remained faithful. This coming Son of Man was God’s agent in bringing about judgment and vindication. And if the Markan Jesus meant this as a self-reference, then he was doubtless

<sup>35</sup> See D.M. Hay, *Glory at the Right Hand: Psalm 110 in Early Christianity* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1973).

<sup>36</sup> The “Son of Man” title is certainly the most debated Christological title applied to Jesus. For the contours of the ongoing debate, see D. Hare, *The Son of Man Tradition* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990), and D. Burkett, *The Son of Man Debate: A History and Evaluation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).



guilty of blasphemy in the eyes of the Jewish leaders. Again, how could anyone be so arrogant as to equate oneself with God? For the early Christians the answer was quite straightforward – he could do so because this is who he was and is.

In the context of the trial scene this saying of Jesus is what apparently gets him condemned for blasphemy by the Jewish authorities. And while a charge of blasphemy might not mean anything to the Romans, it was certainly enough to motivate the Jewish leaders to present him to the Roman authorities as a false prophet who was fomenting sedition and rebellion, something for which the Romans had a zero-tolerance policy and a ready solution in crucifixion. As a blasphemer and one who transgressed the law, then, crucifixion was a wretched punishment that fit the crime. If the Romans had to be the vehicle for carrying out the punishment required by God's law, so be it.

And what did the law have to say about blasphemy? Two passages stand out, Exodus 22:28 and Leviticus 24:10–23. Exodus 22:28 states, "You shall not revile God, or curse a leader of your people." (The NIV version translates the passage as, "Do not blaspheme God or curse the ruler of your people.") And Leviticus 24:11–16 states the following:

The son of the Israelite woman blasphemed the Name with a curse; so they brought him to Moses. (His mother's name was Shelomith, the daughter of Dibri the Danite.) They put him in custody until the will of the LORD should be made clear to them. Then the LORD said to Moses: "Take the blasphemer outside the camp. All those who heard him are to lay their hands on his head, and the entire assembly is to stone him. Say to the Israelites: 'If anyone curses his God, he will be held responsible; anyone who blasphemes the name of the LORD must be put to death. The entire assembly must stone him. Whether an alien or native-born, when he blasphemes the Name, he must be put to death.'"

The cursing of the divine name, or the cursing of God's leaders, indicated a rebellion against God, which warranted the most extreme punishment, death. By making himself equal to God and by denigrating the Jewish authorities, Jesus was guilty of blasphemy and so warranted death.

A passage from the *Mishnah* (*Sanhedrin* 7.5) indicates that blasphemy could be simply a matter of uttering the divine and unspeakable name of God: "The blasphemer is not guilty until he has expressly uttered the Name."<sup>37</sup> But blasphemy was not necessarily only a matter of profane

<sup>37</sup> Danby, *The Mishnah*, 392.

speech; it also could entail profane actions. The desecration of the Temple that led to the Maccabean revolt of 166 BCE is a case in point of blasphemous actions, in this case by an occupying power. In 1 Maccabees 2:6 the priest Mattathias witnesses “blasphemies [*blasphemias*] being committed in Judah and Jerusalem.” Jesus’ actions against the Temple in disrupting the sacrificial system combined with his arrogant speech linking him so closely to God and in such opposition to the Jewish leaders met the threshold of the charge of blasphemy.<sup>38</sup>

In addition to Jesus’ blasphemous statement during his trial, he had already been accused of blasphemy much earlier on in his ministry. In particular, Mark 2:1–12 relates the story of Jesus and the paralyzed man who had been brought by his friends to be healed, and they had done so in quite a dramatic manner.<sup>39</sup> The house where Jesus was staying was so crowded that the only way the man’s friends could get him close to Jesus was by making an opening in the roof and letting the man down on a stretcher. The key turning point comes in Mark 2:5, as Jesus responds to this strong display of faith: “When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven.’” This statement catches the reader completely off guard. What we expect to read is something like “When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘Your faith has made you well; rise, take your pallet and walk.’” Instead, Jesus forgives the man’s sins. The reaction of the scribes gets to the heart of the matter (Mark 2:7): “Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy [*blasphēmei*]! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” The charge here is that Jesus is usurping God’s prerogative by claiming authority for himself to forgive sins, and so act as God. By claiming God’s ability to forgive sin, the Markan Jesus comes across as claiming to have divine authority. Jesus’ claim to forgive sins as God in fact becomes the blasphemous sin.<sup>40</sup> The actual healing that follows is merely confirmation for Mark that Jesus indeed has the power as the “Son of Man” to forgive sins (Mark 2:10).

One final point about this story is important to note: the connection drawn between sin and sickness. Such an association was not uncommon.

<sup>38</sup> As A. Y. Collins observes, “For the high priest and the members of the council as characters in the narrative, . . . these claims of Jesus were audacious impositions upon the majesty and power of God. By making them, Jesus ignored the limits that applied to all who feared the Lord” (“The Charge of Blasphemy in Mark 14:64,” *JSNT* 26:4 (2004): 379–401 (401).

<sup>39</sup> See D. Bock, “Jesus as Blasphemer,” in S. McKnight and J. Modica, *Who Do My Opponents Say I Am?*, 76–94. See also Bock’s longer study, *Blasphemy and Exultation in Judaism and the Final Examination of Jesus* (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1998).

<sup>40</sup> See Marcus, *Mark* 1–8, 215–224; Collins, *Mark*, 185.

Whether Jesus viewed the man as sinful and in need of forgiveness (spiritual healing) as a more important reality than his need of physical healing is simply not open to investigation. In John 5:14, after healing a paralyzed man, Jesus tells him, "See, you have been made well! Do not sin any more, so that nothing worse happens to you." Here Jesus is clearly presented as seeing a connection between sin and sickness. But just a few chapters later, in John 9:2–3, we find the following exchange between Jesus and his disciples regarding a man who had been born blind: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.'" In this case Jesus clearly does not see a connection between sin and sickness. Suffice it to say that the Gospel traditions seem perfectly willing to have it both ways. Similarly, in a discussion of sinful behavior during the Lord's Supper in Corinth, Paul can connect such behavior with illness and even death: "For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves. For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died" (1 Cor. 11:29–30).

Charges of blasphemy, then, form part of standard sharp rhetoric between competing religious groups who claim and vie for the same identity as the people of God in tune with God's will. Just as Jesus is accused of blasphemy when he forgives sin or when in the trial scene he links himself to the coming Son of Man seated at the right hand of God, so Jesus can accuse his opponents of blasphemy as well. Having been on the defensive in Mark 3:21–27 ("How can Satan cast out Satan?"), in Mark 3:28–30 Jesus goes on the offensive (see Matt. 12:31–32; Luke 12:10). In response to the accusation that Jesus has made use of demonic powers, Jesus responds: "Truly I tell you people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin' – for they had said 'He has an unclean spirit.'"

Here the accusers (the scribes) become the accused. Their charge that Jesus casts out demons by the power of Satan shows that they do not recognize the power of God being worked in their midst. If they attribute the work of God's Spirit to the devil, then by extension they will inevitably attribute what is truly demonic to God. And therein lies the blasphemy, and not just any blasphemy, but such a radical confusion between good and evil, between God and Satan, that their entire understanding of God, and hence Jesus, is perverted beyond repair, beyond forgiveness. They cannot see because they will not see, and they will not see because they are aligned

with Satan against Jesus. This kind of charge against the Jewish leaders finds its eventual culmination in a passage like John 8:44, where Jesus says that the Jewish leaders are “from your father the devil.” The real tragedy is that they think they see but in fact are blind. As in John 9:41: “Jesus said to [the Pharisees], ‘If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.’” This sin remains in perpetuity. “In the Markan context blasphemy against the Spirit means the sort of total, malignant opposition to Jesus that twists all the evidence of his life-giving power into evidence that he is demonically possessed.”<sup>41</sup>

The passage parallel to Mark 3:29–30 in Matthew 12:31–37 expands on Jesus’ simple statement about blasphemy and the unforgivable sin against the Holy Spirit. After this affirmation Matthew continues to develop the idea in 12:33–37:

Either make the tree good, and its fruit good; or make the tree bad, and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit. You brood of vipers! How can you speak good things, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person brings good things out of a good treasure, and the evil person brings evil things out of an evil treasure. I tell you, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.

The accusatory speech of the scribes against Jesus is nothing but an example of their bad fruit. Because their hearts are evil, so their words are evil. In this way they demonstrate that in fact they are the ones who are linked to Satan. Their careless words will bring about their own judgment and condemnation from God.<sup>42</sup> In this way the Matthean Jesus (as with the Markan Jesus) deflects the charges of blasphemy by turning the tables and making the same accusation on different grounds against the scribes and Pharisees.

#### TRANSGRESSIVE FAITHFULNESS AND FAITHFUL SIN

To conclude this chapter we will take another look at the pivotal story about Jesus healing the man born blind from John 9. The question remains how to solve the riddle that the Pharisees tried to figure out in dealing with Jesus.

<sup>41</sup> Marcus, *Mark* 1–8, 284.

<sup>42</sup> On the history of interpretation of the “unforgivable sin,” see W.D. Davies and D. Allison, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 348–349, and Luz, *Matthew* 8–20, 206–209, 212.

On the one hand, Jesus did amazing things. He healed a man born blind, according to John, and the Pharisees are portrayed as believing – after much investigation – that the man had been born blind and that Jesus had healed him. Surely this giving of sight must be a sign from God. But, on the other hand, how is one to reconcile this apparently divine sign with the equally obvious fact that Jesus violated the Sabbath by performing this miracle on the one day God commands cessation of labor? The law that God gave was not to be taken lightly. What explanation did Jesus have for why he or the man born blind could not wait one more day?

And so the Pharisees had a decision to make about whether or not Jesus was acting in accord with their understanding of God and God's call to covenant fidelity. Although they were divided over the question, the majority apparently came to conclude that Jesus was wrong because he healed on the Sabbath. There was no good excuse for Jesus to violate the sacred law God had given. If anyone could go around violating God's law and passing it off as being faithful to God, where would that leave people? Such was the dilemma faced by the Pharisees in this story.

What made matters even more difficult is that this story was not an isolated incident; rather, it formed part of a larger pattern or fabric of sayings and actions of Jesus that regularly showed him in conflict not just with the binding oral interpretation of the law as handed down from one generation to the next, but also with the written law as the leaders of the Jewish people understood it. Whether it was Jesus' scandalous behavior in regard to his family or his encouragement of others to abandon their time-honored responsibilities to their own families, whether it was Jesus' scandalous association with friends who were considered sinners or his own questionable judgment in his practice of table fellowship or befriending women, whether it was Jesus' scandalous enactment of the Jewish faith that showed him violating both written and oral law as understood by the rabbis of his day in regard to the Sabbath, the temple, or blasphemy against God – wherever one turns in Jesus' ministry we find him embroiled in one controversy after another.<sup>43</sup>

Our temptation is to quickly follow the Gospel traditions and to understand the scandalous actions and sayings of Jesus in light of resurrection faith. In this view Jesus could do no wrong, because he came from God and returned to God. Thus, while there may be some difficult things to

<sup>43</sup> See P.J. Gomes, *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), where Gomes contrasts the conventional values of the world with the challenging teachings of Jesus.

understand about Jesus, in the end there is really only one thing to understand: that Jesus revealed the truth about God and the truth about the meaning of faithful human existence within the covenant people of God. In this view Jesus actually redefined what counted as sin before God. This leap to the risen Christ, however, at least within the Christian community, is one that we take much too quickly, and in the process we avoid dealing with some truly important issues regarding Jesus. And so, at the risk of a little blasphemy all my own, I offer the following reflections.

First, I would argue that we always find ourselves in the tenuous position that the Pharisees occupied in relation to Jesus. We are ever trying to discern what is in keeping with our faith convictions and what is contrary to these convictions. Just as Jesus engaged in no small dispute with the religious leaders of his day, so too are we constantly in the process of sorting through disputes about the meaning of faith and about God's desire for our lives, both as individuals and collectively. Just as Jesus transgressed boundaries, and in the process sinned in the eyes of the religious leaders of his day, so also do we find ourselves in the position of having to decide what counts as faithfulness or a lack of faithfulness.

Second, in my view we need to reflect more deeply on Jesus as a transgressor, as a sinner. He was certainly not a sinner in a criminal sense. But he did violate Jewish law in serious ways. Whereas Jewish leaders in Jesus' day sought to keep themselves pure from defilement, in keeping with the law, whether by too close an association with Gentiles or with those deemed to be sinners, Jesus apparently regularly acted in ways contrary to such practice. He also appears to have somewhat relativized the significance of observing the purity laws. His critique of worship in the Jerusalem Temple, while not unique, put him at still further odds with the religious leadership of the people. Finally, his claims to be an authoritative interpreter of Jewish faith and practice, even against the religious authorities, smacked of an arrogance that was certainly confident, but an arrogance that also clearly bordered on and crossed into blasphemy in the view of the teachers of the day.

All of these are serious breaches of first-century Jewish faith and practice that could be and were seen as sinful departures from God's intentions for God's people. We should not pretend otherwise. In the current so-called third quest for the historical Jesus,<sup>44</sup> which has blessedly emphasized the Jewishness of Jesus, there has also been a curious underside that in my view

<sup>44</sup> See, e.g., B. Witherington, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010).

has gone unnoticed. In correctly emphasizing the Jewishness of Jesus, Christian scholars in particular have often softened some of the edges that would highlight serious tensions between Jesus and the other Jewish religious leaders of his day. While the irenic purpose of such interpretation makes good sense in light of contemporary Jewish/Christian relations, I wonder if it does not also smooth over some of the genuine and fundamental disagreements between Jesus and his contemporaries.<sup>45</sup> My concern is that we end up mapping our own world onto the world of Jesus, with the result that we can end up stressing continuity between Jesus and rival teachers at the expense of truly appreciating the substance of their disputes. To be sure, the danger of using such disputes to again club Jews and Judaism over the head must be held in check and avoided at all costs. At the same time, it remains important to let the tensions and differences stand for what they are.

Third, as we move in the next chapter to a consideration of Jesus' death as a sinful death, we must be mindful that the charges against Jesus were not trumped up but in fact actually represented the concerns of his contemporaries that Jesus was a dangerous figure, so dangerous that his transgressions warranted his death. From a Christian perspective, of course, Jesus' transgressions were faithful and in keeping with the call of God's Spirit to which Jesus bore witness. He did not warrant death, but died all the same. The relationship between his death and his ministry will be a significant issue in the next chapter.

Fourth, and finally, I think we need seriously to reflect on what might best be termed the transgressive faithfulness of Jesus.<sup>46</sup> We could also refer to this as the sinful faith of Jesus. The teachings and actions of Jesus placed in stark relief the conflicted worlds of faith and transgression, sin and obedience. This leads us back to the dilemma of the Pharisees in John 9 – is Jesus in fact to be praised for his healing ministry, or is he to be condemned for breaking the Sabbath? How is it that transgression can be faithful, that sin can express obedience? And when is apparent faithfulness actually an expression of sin, or what appears to be obedience actually transgression? And who gets to decide? From a Christian perspective, and I would suggest from a Jewish perspective as well, this is ever the task before us in seeking to discern the

<sup>45</sup> See J.S. Siker, "Abraham, Paul, and the Politics of Christian Identity," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 16:1 (2009): 56–70, which explores the impact of modern Jewish/Christian dialogue on the politics of interpretation.

<sup>46</sup> See bell hooks' *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

leading of God's Spirit. Just as different Jewish groups fought faithfully and vigorously over such discernment in Jesus' day, so have both Jewish and Christian groups since then continued an animated set of conversations and debates, diatribes and monologues, over the meaning of faith in changing times, and the living out of the covenant relationship between God and God's people in a world of sin and hurt.



## From Sinful Death to Perfect Death

**I**N THE PREVIOUS CHAPTERS WE HAVE TRACED ASSOCIATIONS OF Jesus with human sinfulness in terms of his birth, baptism, and ministry. We have also seen how Jesus' followers and early Christian tradition interpreted such sinful associations precisely as occasions to reflect on Jesus' perfect virgin birth, his perfectly righteous baptism, and his perfectly obedient ministry in relation to family, friends, and faith. As we turn to consider the death of Jesus within these dual trajectories of sin and perfection, we come to the culmination of Jesus' life. In the death of Jesus sin and perfection become inseparably intertwined in subsequent Christian tradition. Indeed, I think it is safe to say that the death of Jesus was the single most important event in the development of early Christian theology, even more important than the resurrection in many respects. To be sure, apart from belief in the resurrection the death of Jesus would have had little meaning beyond a tragic end to such a promising life. But the resurrection and glorification of Jesus is less of a problem than a solution for early Christians; his death is the real point of contention. As Paul says, "we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Cor. 1:23). If there were problems generated by Jesus' unusual birth story, and still further problems that arose from the story of Jesus' baptism (for forgiveness of sin) and his ministry (violating notions of family, friends, and faith), his death was scandalous in the extreme. How could anyone venerate such a disgraced figure? He had challenged the religious leaders, and he had lost. He had proclaimed the coming of God's reign, but his crucifixion only made clearer still the absolute grip with which the Romans held sway in Palestine. He had spoken in apocalyptic terms, but the only unveiling was of another dead prophet, like John the Baptist before him.

The death of Jesus was tragic on a monumental scale. It shattered all of the hopes and expectations of Jesus' followers, catching them completely off-guard in relation to their messianic understanding and expectation of Jesus.

The death of Jesus forced his followers to reevaluate in fundamental terms everything they had thought. Initially this reevaluation challenged the very conviction that Jesus was the long-awaited messiah. The story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus from Luke 24 demonstrates, at least from Luke's perspective, what the followers of Jesus had thought both before his death and then immediately afterward, the only glimpse we get of what they were thinking after his death but before the report of the resurrection. "We *had* hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel" (Luke 24:21). Their hope clearly had not included the possibility that Jesus would die before such redemption took place. After his death, they no longer held such a hope. Indeed, historically it is fairly simple to show that the resurrection of Jesus was the furthest thought from their minds. When the women went to Jesus' tomb on the first day of the week, they went to anoint his body (Mark 16:1). Clearly, they were expecting to find his body. And when the women told the disciples that the tomb was empty, and that Jesus had been raised from the dead, "these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them" (Luke 24:11). Despite the passion predictions, which include the statement on the lips of Jesus that the Son of Man would be raised after three days (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:34), the followers of Jesus could understand his death only in tragic terms, an indication that at least the resurrection predictions were retrospectively placed on the lips of Jesus as his followers came to tell the story of the crucified and *risen* Jesus. This retrospection finds confirmation in an editorial aside from the Gospel of John, where after Peter and the Beloved Disciple run to see the empty tomb (with the Beloved Disciple apparently believing Jesus has been raised, and an out-of-breath Peter somewhat bewildered), the author tells the reader: "as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead" (John 20:9).

All too often the popular image today is that somehow the disciples knew that Jesus would rise from the dead. After all, had not Jesus told them so (e.g., Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:34)? This popular understanding is perhaps nowhere better epitomized than in a rather remarkable scene from the end of the epic film *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, directed by George Stevens. After Jesus (played by Max von Sydow) has been put to death, Pontius Pilate (played by Telly Savalas, who also played "Kojak") assigns guards to watch the tomb (Matt. 27:62–66). The film then cuts directly to the early morning of Easter Sunday. We hear trumpets in the background, the sun is cued, and strains of Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus" begin to sound softly, getting louder as the scene continues. Sleepy guards see that the stone has been rolled back from the tomb. Meanwhile, the despondent disciples are gathered in an upper room somewhere, and the following dialogue takes place:

DISCIPLE (off screen)  
I've been wondering all night about something. The prophecy  
is that . . .

THOMAS (interrupting him)  
Don't talk to me about prophecy; I've heard enough about  
prophecy.

MARY MAGDALENE (staring off, continuing the thought of the first disciple,  
as if realizing something for the first time)  
. . . When he is killed, after three days he will rise again . . .  
(She gets up to leave in a hurry, with excitement.)

THOMAS Where are you going?

MARY MAGDALENE I'm going to the tomb, Thomas!

THOMAS Why?  
(Scene shifts to the tomb.)

ANGEL (played by a flat-voiced Pat Boone, to Mary Magdalene)  
He is gone. Why seek ye the living among the dead? He is risen.

MARY MAGDALENE (to the disciples gathering outside the tomb)  
He is risen. He is risen!  
(Full strains of the "Hallelujah Chorus")

In this amazing scene Mary Magdalene does not go to the tomb in order to anoint the body, as in Mark's Gospel (Mark 16:1). Nor does she go simply to see the tomb, with guards posted, as in Matthew's Gospel (Matt. 27:62–66). Rather, she goes to confirm that the tomb is empty and that Jesus is risen. Why this prophecy of a risen messiah (which is nowhere to be found in Jewish scripture – Christian protestations notwithstanding) did not occur to her until now remains unclear. The scene depicts something found nowhere in any of the Gospels. It is almost as if the disciples in the upper room suddenly said to themselves, "Hey, wait a minute! Didn't he tell us he would rise from the dead? Let's go see!" And sure enough, risen he is. This is not to make light of the story; rather, it is to call attention to the utter discontinuity between death and resurrection. Any effort to portray a smooth transition from one to the other inevitably fails because of the scandal of Jesus' death, on the one hand, and the sheer glorious incredulity of the resurrection, on the other hand.

#### A SINFUL DEATH

What was so scandalous about Jesus' death? John the Baptist had been executed by Herod. Why would Jesus' execution as a prophet who bothered the religious and political powers of the day be any more surprising or troubling than the death of John? For the ruling elite, of course, it would not be. John and Jesus both had developed followings, had challenged the

religious authorities, and were potential political thorns that the ruling authorities would be happy to see go away. Herod had simply saved the religious leaders the trouble of having finally to deal with the meddlesome John the Baptist, whose baptism implicitly called into question the authority and legitimacy of the Pharisees and priests (see Matt. 3:6; Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 18.5.2). We can only imagine that the death of John the Baptist was a significant tragedy for his followers, if perhaps not altogether surprising given John's status as an outsider prophet who railed against the status quo in preparation for some apocalyptic future about to unfold. We can also imagine that John's execution came as a rude reality-check for both Jesus and his followers. If John had been put to death, did this not put those who had an association with John in greater danger?<sup>1</sup> And if John had developed a popular following, along with grudging respect from the religious authorities, the ministry of Jesus had created an even greater sense of expectation and apocalyptic fervor. Not only did he teach with authority, there were also stories about his power to heal (e.g., Mark 1:27, 45). The stakes were higher with Jesus on every count.

Thus, for those who followed Jesus, his execution was a blow beyond words. As the distraught disciples on the road to Emmaus unknowingly told the risen Jesus about "Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people" (Luke 24:19), they thought only about their dashed hopes and expectations. A mighty prophet, but he did not have sufficient power to redeem Israel this side of death. Even when the risen Jesus makes an appearance in Acts 1:6, the first question the disciples ask is, "Will you at *this* time restore the kingdom to Israel?" The implication seems to be something like "We were hoping the redemption of Israel was going to happen during your public ministry. But then you died! Will the kingdom we had expected come now that you have risen?" The risen Jesus does not directly answer their question, saying only, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority" (Acts 1:7). He then shifts the focus to the coming of the Holy Spirit, which would be poured out upon them during Pentecost (Acts 2).

The death of John the Baptist had been tragic, but we have no real evidence that his followers saw his death as anything but the killing of a righteous prophet by an expedient ruler. His death itself, his martyrdom, was not a scandal for John's ministry of repentance. It may well be that some

<sup>1</sup> See the discussion in J. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, 4 vols. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991–2009), vol. 2: 171–176.

thought of John in messianic terms, because he had spoken of *preparing* for God's coming rule, with a parallel emphasis on the *imminence* of God's rule – something Jesus stressed perhaps even more (Mark 9:1; Matt. 16:28). But John had nothing of Jesus' reputation for performing powerful deeds, nor does John seem to have been engaged in the same kinds of direct conflict with the religious authorities that Jesus had. The case of Jesus was different. On a surface level the executions of the two prophets differed in terms of how they were put to death and the executing authority. Whereas John had been beheaded somewhat in private by Herod in his fortress at Machaerus (near the Dead Sea), Jesus had been publicly crucified by the Romans in Jerusalem. Unlike with John, Jesus' death completely undermined the messianic hopes of his followers – not just because he died, but precisely because of *who* put him to death (the Romans), and because of *how* he died (crucifixion).

From the perspective of the Roman political authorities the execution of Jesus was simply one more case of putting down potential rebellion in territory controlled by Rome. The romanticized dialogue between Jesus and Pilate notwithstanding, it is more likely that Pilate had little to no direct dealings with Jesus leading up to his crucifixion.<sup>2</sup> From the perspective of the Jewish religious authorities, the execution of Jesus by means of crucifixion was a fitting judgment against him as a false prophet, a sinful prophet who was misleading the people and arrogating to himself an authority he did not legitimately possess. But for his followers the death of Jesus brought about the violent end to their messianic hopes. If Jesus were truly the Davidic messiah, then he would somehow usher in God's restoration of the kingdom of Israel, and the Roman occupiers would be toppled. But the execution of Jesus showed the Romans to be rather effectively in control.

Still worse – if it could get worse – Jesus was executed by means of crucifixion, a notoriously humiliating death in which the victim could linger for days. Crucifixion was reserved for the worst criminals, and was accordingly an excruciating way to die.<sup>3</sup> As Paula Fredriksen has aptly put it, crucifixion was a “public service announcement” made by the Roman authorities.<sup>4</sup> The message was as clear and simple as it was brutal: do not

<sup>2</sup> See R.E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave*, 2 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 676–722.

<sup>3</sup> See M. Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977); D.W. Chapman, *Ancient Jewish and Christian Perceptions of Crucifixion* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> P. Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth: King of the Jews* (New York: Knopf, 1999), 233.

behave in this way, or you will be next. When the slave Spartacus led a revolt in 73–71 BCE, the Romans captured and crucified 6,000 rebels along popular roads. As historian Barry Strauss has noted, the Romans viewed the practice of crucifixion as a deterrent to future crimes as much as a punishment for crimes committed.<sup>5</sup> Crucifixion was considered “the supreme penalty, reserved for rebellious foreigners, violent criminals, brigands, and slaves.”<sup>6</sup> All who acted in a similar way could expect a similar fate.<sup>7</sup> In 36 BCE Octavian Caesar, soon to become the emperor Augustus, ordered the crucifixion of 6,000 slave rowers from the fleet of Sextus Pompey, a rival to Octavian. The numbers are likely gross exaggerations, but the point is simply that a large number of people suffered the ordeal of crucifixion because they were on the wrong side of the ruling powers. Even in Palestine we hear about the crucifixion of 800 Pharisees under the king of Judea, Alexander Jannaeus, who ruled from 103 to 76 BCE. Josephus says that the king had the wives and children of the Pharisees killed before their eyes while they were being crucified (*Jewish Antiquities*, 13.380; *The Jewish War*, 1.97–98). Another 2,000 rebels were reportedly crucified in Judaea under the rule of the Roman official Quintilius Varus in 4 BCE. And when the Romans lay siege to Jerusalem during the Jewish War of 66–70 CE, Josephus states that 500 people a day were crucified (*The Jewish War*, 5.6.5). Those in power had an extremely low threshold for any threat to their rule, and crucifixion was an effective means of keeping potential rebellion in check.

Not only was crucifixion an effective way to subdue any revolt, real or imagined, it was also an extremely powerful way to shame and publicly disgrace the worst offenders, those whose lives threatened Roman stability sufficiently to warrant the most humiliating form of death by public execution. The famous “Alexamenos graffito” (see figures) is a good reminder of the degree to which popular Roman culture viewed crucifixion as public humiliation. It also reminds us of just how scandalous the death of Jesus was for his followers. From the Roman perspective, Christians might as well be worshiping a dead man with an ass’s head.<sup>8</sup>

The second-century Christian theologian Tertullian (c. 160–220 CE) makes a reference to this charge against Christians in his apologetic treatise

<sup>5</sup> B. Strauss, *The Spartacus War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009), 190–192.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>7</sup> See B.D. Shaw, ed. and trans., *Spartacus and the Slave Wars: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2001), 14–23, 130–165.

<sup>8</sup> On the Alexamenos graffito, see J.G. Cook, “Envisioning Crucifixion: Light from Several Inscriptions and the Palatine Graffito,” *NovT* 50 (2008): 262–228.



The Alexamenos graffito, likely dating from the late second or early third century, was discovered in 1857 during the excavation of the Palatine Hill in Rome.

The graffito is an amateurish inscription on a plaster wall that was found in the Domus Gelotiana, part of the ancient imperial palace at Rome. The graffito is now housed in the Museo Palatino (the Antiquarian Palatine Museum) in Rome. The image above is a sharp photograph, and the outline tracing of the image on the facing page provides a graphic depiction.

Photo By Comrade Foot via StockPholio.com

Photo by Internet Archive Book Images via StockPholio.com

*Ad Nationes* ("To the Nations"), stating: "[W]e are (said to be) guilty not merely of forsaking the religion of the community, but of introducing a monstrous superstition; for some among you have dreamed that our god is an ass's head – an absurdity which Cornelius Tacitus first suggested" (*Ad Nationes*, 1.11).<sup>9</sup> It is no accident that explicit Christian depictions of the

<sup>9</sup> *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3: 121.



The Greek phrase scratched beneath the image reads: *Alexamenos cebete theon*, which means 'Alexamenos [the figure on the left] worships [his] god.'

crucifixion in graphic art for veneration cannot be found until after the time of the emperor Constantine in the fourth century, when Christianity became the official state religion.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> On depictions of the cross in the form of the stauogram (the superimposition of the Greek letter rho, P, upon the Greek letter tau, T, to form a kind of cross), see Larry Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 135–154.



There is no real doubt as to the historical reason for Jesus' crucifixion. The Gospel writers all relate the political charge against him: King of the Jews. The charge was even affixed as an inscription (Matt. 27:37; Mark 15:26; Luke 23:38; John 19:19). Of course for the Gospel writers there is a wonderful irony here – for it is not just an accusation, but the truth. While the Gospels do not depict Jesus as ever accepting this title (aside from John; see John 1:49), his public ministry certainly gained the attention of those who were in charge, from both the Jewish and Roman authorities. And how could it not? He gathered followers, challenged religious leaders and institutions, and spoke of a coming kingdom. His followers, furthermore, expected him to usher in the restoration of the kingdom to Israel (Luke 24:21; Acts 1:6). Jesus was executed on political grounds. But for the Gospel writers, for the early Christians, and for Christians through the ages up to the present day, the crucifixion and death of Jesus provides the occasion for deep theological reflection. From a theological point of view, the political rationale for Jesus' death is the superficial reason for his death. The real reason for his death lies much deeper and is much more profound. And so the Gospel of John can attribute a meaningful double entendre to the high priest (11:48–53):

So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, "What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation." But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God. So from that day on they planned to put him to death.

Here John has Caiaphas unwittingly prophesize regarding the significance of Jesus' death, a death that on the surface will ease tension with the Romans, but a death that on a deeper level would bring about salvation and forgiveness of sins to all who believe, and judgment on those who reject Jesus.

This passage from John illustrates how, as Jesus' followers reflected on their dashed theo-political hopes in the aftermath of Jesus' death, their belief in his resurrection from the dead forced a reinterpretation of his ministry and death alike. This reinterpretation shifted the focus from a this-worldly *political* transformation in the present time ("my kingdom is not of this world," John 18:36) with otherworldly spiritual overtones to a this-worldly *spiritual* transformation that would be fulfilled in an eschatological future

with political transformation still to come in God's good time. The restoration of the kingdom of God to Israel had always been construed in one way or another as a blend of political and theological hopes and aspirations.<sup>11</sup> But the death of Jesus and belief in his resurrection completely reshaped this blending so that his death was assigned positive theological value, even though on the surface his death indeed appeared to be only foolishness and a stumbling block. His death *had* to be given positive theological value in light of his resurrection, otherwise his death would make no sense and serve no clear purpose. But purpose it had to have. From the perspective of Jesus' early followers, his death *must* have been part of God's plan, even if it made little sense to them at the time, and even if they struggled with explaining such a purpose in light of the resurrection. As the risen Jesus in Luke's Gospel put it (24:26): "Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" The death of Jesus *must* have been a necessary part of God's plan, as otherwise why would God raise *this* crucified messiah to new life and have him appear in glory to his flabbergasted followers? Such was the thinking of the earliest Christians, as they reasoned from their experience of the risen Jesus to their experience of the crucified Jesus, and then back to the public ministry of Jesus. Or to put it in more loaded terms, they reasoned from their experience of the risen and glorified *Christ* to their experience of the crucified and failed *Jesus*. But ultimately it was not a failure after all, they came to believe, but a completely unexpected and earth-shattering twist in God's dealings with Israel. How were they to make sense of this seemingly senseless death? How was the powerful ministry of Jesus, which seemed to promise the coming of God's kingdom, to be understood in light of such an ignoble death, the resurrection notwithstanding? Such was the immediate task of Jesus' followers in the aftermath of death and resurrection. Such has been the task of Jesus' followers over the centuries as well.

In what follows we will briefly explore how various early Christian authors came to explain the reason for and significance of Jesus' death, especially in connection with understandings of human sin. As we will see, the answers range from mere assertion of its necessity (because only in this way could Jesus *rise* from the dead), with Jesus as a righteous and innocent martyr (so Luke), to interpreting Jesus' death as an efficacious and ultimate sacrifice

<sup>11</sup> One has only to think of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the conviction reflected there of both a priestly messiah, to restore proper worship in the Temple, along with a Davidic messiah to restore the kingdom to Israel. See, e.g., J. Vanderkam, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Today*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 139–147.

for human sinfulness (so, e.g., John and Hebrews). This last explanation received particularly significant development within the Christian tradition and will occupy a good part of the material that follows. But it must be seen in perspective along with other explanations, as all of these explanations have been advocated to one degree or another in the traditions of the church.<sup>12</sup> In all of these understandings of Jesus' death, Christians also engaged fully in the process of retrospective theologizing – making sense of the death of Jesus in light of their conviction that God had raised him from the dead.

#### SINFUL PERFECTION IN PAUL

The associations of Jesus' death with sin were clear enough to everyone. Far from the triumphal messiah bringing about the reign of God with power, Jesus was the crucified messiah (thus ending his messianic identity) whose life ended in tragic weakness. From the perspective of the religious authorities, his death put an end to the scandal of his blasphemous ministry. The sin was his. From the perspective of his followers, his death served as an indictment of the scandalous power structures that ruled their political and religious worlds. The sin should be located there (John 9:41).

But belief in the resurrection changed everything for the followers of Jesus. For his opponents the report of the resurrection did nothing but extend the mischief of Jesus' ministry and escalate a whole new series of problems (see Matt. 27:62–66). But for his followers belief in the resurrection both radically confirmed and transformed their deepest hopes and convictions about Jesus as God's messiah. A scandalous death? Yes, to be sure. A messy death? Yes, in every sense of the word. Yet a death and a ministry not only vindicated by God, but that now came to epitomize and to occupy the central meaning of his ministry as one empowered by God. All of the earliest Christian leaders would struggle to articulate the mysterious significance of this unheard-of reality, a crucified and risen messiah.<sup>13</sup> All of them struggled to find the right language to express what they believed had taken place, what God had done through Jesus. They found it difficult to explain, to settle on only one way of approaching this scandalous salvation. And yet all of them were convinced that in light of the resurrection this sinful and shameful death was somehow the key to it all. What theological doors and visions of God would such a key unlock?

<sup>12</sup> See J. D. Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> See N. Dahl, "The Crucified Messiah," in *The Crucified Messiah and Other Essays* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1974), 10–36.

*The Death of Jesus in the Theology of Paul: Obedience, Sacrifice, and Sin*

The Apostle Paul has certainly been among the most significant interpreters of the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection, and perhaps the most important. In addition to representing the earliest Christian writings that we have (from the late 40s through the early 60s in the first century CE), he also engaged in extensive and formative theological reflection about Jesus' death and resurrection. It is no accident that his writings came to occupy a central, if at times troublesome (see 2 Pet. 3:15–17), place in the authoritative scriptures of the Church. In Paul's view, the death of Jesus was at the heart of faith. Indeed, it is fair to say that Paul made the cross in particular the locus of God's revelation in Christ (1 Cor. 2:2).<sup>14</sup> This revelation showed both the *essential identity* of God as a gracious God who loves humanity beyond all measure (Rom. 5:8) and the *exemplary identity* of faithful human existence as obedient response to God's love (Rom. 5:19; Phil. 2:5–11). In short, for Paul the death of Jesus on the cross was an act of God's faithfulness toward human beings, as well as the foundational event allowing for renewed human faithfulness toward God. In the death of Jesus the ultimate act of divine incarnation and the apotheosis of humanity blended and merged in the process of revealing the true identity of both God and human in faithful relationship to each other. This mysterious union of divine and human finds no better expression than the so-called Christ hymn from Philippians 2:5–11 (NRSV):

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,  
 who,  
     though he was in the form of God [*morphē theou*],  
     did not regard equality with God  
     as something to be exploited,  
     but emptied himself [*ekenōsen*],  
     taking the form of a slave [*morphēn doulou*],  
     being born in human likeness [*en homoiōmati anthrōpōn*].  
     And being found in human form [*schēmati . . . hōs anthrōpos*],  
     he humbled himself  
     and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.  
 Therefore God also highly exalted him  
 and gave him the name

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., M. Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).

that is above every name,  
 so that at the name of Jesus  
 every knee should bend,  
 in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
 and every tongue should confess  
 that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

This hymn speaks clearly of the self-emptying (*kenosis*) of Jesus, as well as of God's exaltation of Jesus in response to such sacrificial obedience. There is much debate about this passage, a debate that illustrates quite well the dual revelation that Paul saw in Christ.<sup>15</sup> On the one hand, some scholars argue that this hymn to Christ demonstrates that Paul saw Jesus as preexistent and fully divine, because Paul refers to Christ as being in the "form of God" (*morphe theou*).<sup>16</sup> In this view the hymn emphasizes the movement from God to humanity in Christ, who empties himself of his divine status in order to become one with humanity. On the other hand, some scholars argue that this hymn to Christ demonstrates that Paul saw him as the embodiment of God's true intention for human existence, because – like Adam – he was created in the image of God, but – unlike Adam – he did not count equality with God as something to be grasped or exploited.<sup>17</sup> He was not deceived into thinking he could elevate himself to divine status. In this view the hymn emphasizes the movement from humanity to God in Christ. The first approach is more of a Christology from above (the divine Jesus), whereas the second approach is more of a Christology from below (the human Jesus). In either approach Jesus serves as the intersection and means for both God's reaching out to humanity and the human yearning for God. But the matter of emphasis, of where one starts, is no small matter. If, for Paul, Jesus was not the preexistent incarnation of God (as in the Gospel of John), he surely revealed something so fundamental about God that Paul experienced a radical change of heart. And if, for Paul, Jesus was truly human in every respect, he represented an idealized humanity through whom God could

<sup>15</sup> See especially R. Martin, *Carmen Christi: Philippians ii.5–11 in Recent Interpretation and in the Setting of Early Christianity* (London: Cambridge, 1967); R. Martin and B. Dodd, eds., *Where Christology Began: Essays on Philippians 2* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998); and the extended discussion by J. Reumann, *Philippians* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 333–383.

<sup>16</sup> See Martin, *Carmen Christi*, 99–133; C.A. Wanamaker, "Philippians 2:6–11: Son of God or Adamic Christology?," *NTS* 33 (1987): 179–193.

<sup>17</sup> See J.D.G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM Press, 1989), 98–128, and J.D.G. Dunn, "Christ, Adam, and Preexistence," in Martin and Dodd, *Where Christology Began*, 74–83.

deal in some ultimate sense with the problem of human idolatry and human rebellion against God – in short, with the problem of human sinfulness. Paul is no easy study in his negotiation of the identity of Jesus.

Even with these qualifications, I think the Philippians 2 hymn is best read in view of an Adam Christology (a Christology from below), and not as witness to the preexistence of Jesus with God. Such an understanding of Jesus as a new Adam fits better with Paul's understanding and depiction of Christ elsewhere in his letters. As Paul will state much more explicitly in Romans 5:14–19, whereas Adam sinned and was disobedient, and thus did not live up to God's intentions for human faithfulness, Christ was righteous and obedient to God, and so fulfilled God's desire for human faithfulness. As the Philippians hymn stresses, Jesus was faithful and obedient in the most extreme sense, even to the point of death. And not just any death, Paul continues, but even the most humiliating form of death on a cross. God's response to such obedient faithfulness, expressly articulated in the Philippians 2 hymn, was to raise Jesus from the dead to new life. God thus exalted an obedient Jesus through the resurrection. The Christ/Adam contrast also finds expression in 1 Corinthians 15:21–22, where Paul states: "Since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ." If Adam was a tragic paradigm of human sin and death, then for Paul Christ established a new paradigm of human faithfulness and life – even in the face of death. Adam's sin led to condemnation and death, but Christ's obedience led to an unjust death rectified through his resurrected life.

This same motif can be seen in Romans 1:4–5, where Paul states that Jesus "was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead" and that through him "we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name." Once again we find here the coordination of the obedience of faith, God's raising Jesus from the dead, and the declaration that he has been revealed as the exalted Lord, the Son of God. The logic of Paul's argument moves from faith that God has raised Jesus from the dead to what kind of person this Jesus must have been in order for God to raise him up. Jesus must have been faithful and obedient to God in some radical sense, exemplary beyond measure, truly prototypical of a new kind of human existence, a humanity living up to its potential as created in the *imago dei*, the image of God. Such confidence is expressed in the Philippians 2 hymn as well as in Romans 1 and 1 Corinthians 15.

But clearly Paul had not always believed or felt this way about Jesus. After all, Paul states openly that he had violently persecuted those who

proclaimed belief in the risen Jesus (Gal. 1:13). And if Paul persecuted the earliest Christians, then it seems fair to conclude that Paul had arrived at the same conclusion that his fellow Pharisees had about the Jesus these early Christians venerated, namely, that Jesus was a dangerous teacher who challenged their authority and who violated the Jewish law in most serious ways. This view of Jesus as an unfaithful Jew is not one that has received much attention in the study of Paul. Before Paul had his experience of the risen Christ (Gal. 1:15–16), he was convinced in the strongest manner that these followers of Jesus were false believers who needed to be confronted and stopped before they corrupted other Jews, before they spread their idolatrous heresy. We can well imagine that the kind of vitriolic language Paul reserves for the false teachers in Galatia (perverted, confused, accursed; Gal. 1:7–8) would have been similar to the language he would have applied to the earliest Christians and to the ministry of Jesus himself. The Acts of the Apostles portrays Paul as bearing letters from the High Priest in Jerusalem for the arrest of these misguided Jewish believers in Jesus who were in Damascus (9:2). According to Acts, the believer (a certain Ananias) given the unpleasant task of going to Paul and restoring his sight after Paul's vision is not at all sure God fully understands just how dangerous Paul is to the health of Christians: "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name" (9:13–14). It is as if Ananias is telling "the Lord" (probably another vision of the risen Jesus), "Look, you really ought to rethink enlisting Paul in your service! He's a bad one!" But the Lord is not swayed, and so off Ananias goes and lays hands upon Paul so that he might regain his sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit (9:17).

Paul's "call" (Gal. 1:15) through the revelation of the risen Christ thus involved a sea-change in his evaluation of both the followers of Jesus and Jesus himself. Prior to his experience of Christ, Paul thought of himself in robust terms as a truly faithful Jew who was "blameless" (*amemptos*) in regard to righteousness under the law (Phil. 3:6).<sup>18</sup> This was in stark contrast to the family-denying, Sabbath-breaking, blasphemous Jesus who associated with known sinners and violated the traditions of the elders. This Jesus was anything but righteous under the law. He was a sinner and a false teacher who deserved the accursed death by crucifixion, and his followers warranted much the same treatment – whether by sanctioning the execution of Stephen

<sup>18</sup> See the classic article by K. Stendahl, "Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," *HTR* 55 (1963): 199–215.

by stoning (Acts 7) or by arresting these perverted believers in Damascus and bringing them to Jerusalem for trial (Acts 8). Such misguided believers should surely be put out of the synagogue and given no quarter in the life of Judaism (see John 9:22; 12:42; 16:1–4).

But after Paul's experience of the risen Christ, everything changed – as Paul tells us in so many ways. He came to count his righteousness under the law as “loss because of Christ” (Phil. 3:7). And far from deserving the death he suffered, Paul now viewed God's raising Jesus from the dead as vindication of his righteous ministry. He viewed Jesus no longer as a sinner, a misguided and dangerous teacher, but as one through whom God dealt with the problem of human sinfulness. As we have seen already in Philippians 2, Christ was obedient and faithful to God even to the point of death on a cross – therefore God has highly exalted him. The ministry of Jesus had become paradigmatic for faithfulness, a faithfulness to which Paul called the members of his churches. “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1). As Jesus had embodied what it meant to be fully human in the eyes of God, so now Paul saw participating in this embodiment as the ultimate expression of obedient faith. Thus he can say that “it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). He can also write about participating with other believers as a member of the “body of Christ” (Rom. 12; 1 Cor. 12). Paul was convinced that it was the faithful Spirit of God in Christ that animated his own spirit. This language of participation in the life of Christ is a hallmark of Paul's understanding of being united with other believers in Christ, truly the body of Christ.<sup>19</sup>

Given Paul's emphasis on the obedient faithfulness of Jesus, as well as his emphasis on being imitators of Christ, we would expect that Paul would say a bit more about the life of Jesus than he does. Indeed, one of the most striking observations about Paul's statements regarding Jesus is that Paul almost never says anything about the life and teachings of Jesus, with the exception of a saying on divorce (1 Cor. 7:10) and a saying that one who preaches is owed a living (1 Cor. 9:14). Beyond this, there is virtually nothing. Paul does state that Jesus was “born of a woman” (Gal. 4:4), but this is hardly headline news. When Paul claims in 1 Corinthians 2:2 that he decided to know nothing among them except Christ and him crucified, he really seems to have meant it. Could Paul simply presume that they knew something

<sup>19</sup> See, e.g., E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 502–508; David Horrell, “‘No Longer Jew or Greek’: Paul's Corporate Christology and the Construction of Christian Community,” in *Christology, Controversy, and Community*, ed. D.G. Catchpole, C.M. Tuckett, and D.R. Horrell (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 321–344.



about the teachings of Jesus, something about his ministry? Paul seems so focused on the death and resurrection of Jesus that his life somehow seems merely prelude to death and resurrection as the main act. This can be seen in one of the earliest Christian confessional formulas, which Paul recites in 1 Corinthians 15:3–5:

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received:

that Christ died for our sins  
in accordance with the scriptures,  
and that he was buried,  
and that he was raised on the third day  
in accordance with the scriptures,  
and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.

The emphasis in this confessional statement falls on Christ's death for sins and resurrection on the third day, both "in accordance with the scriptures," along with his appearance to Cephas (Peter), the twelve, and eventually Paul himself (1 Cor. 15:8). But what about *before* his death? What about the *life* of Jesus? Was this not also "of first importance"? Did this not matter at all to Paul? Though some of Paul's statements may give this impression, especially because Paul does not seem to have ever met the earthly Jesus (unlike Peter and others), a number of scholars have increasingly emphasized that Paul does, in fact, appeal to the narrative of Jesus' life, even if this appeal is often implicit. In this view not only is Christ the object of faith for later believers, but Jesus himself is seen as having acted in faithful obedience to the call of God. He was not merely a passive sacrificial victim; rather, his own response of faith to God led directly to his death. In short, Jesus' faithfulness to God finds its goal in God's faithfulness to Jesus.

Much of this debate involves how best to translate a little phrase in Greek: *pistis Christou*, literally "faith Christ." Of course, "faith Christ" makes little sense in English translation without supplying a preposition between the two words. In the Greek original it is not necessary to supply the preposition, as the grammatical construction implies a connecting preposition (see Gal. 2:16; 3:22; Rom. 3:22; and Phil. 3:9). The problem is that it can imply either what is called an "objective" reading (i.e., "faith *in* Christ") or a "subjective" reading (i.e., "faith *of* Christ"). The question is whether Paul is referring to the *believer's faith* in what God has done in Christ or referring to *Christ's own faithfulness* in response to God. These are not, it should be noted, mutually exclusive options. But in the history of interpretation the emphasis has always been on the *believer's faith in* Christ as that which brings salvation, and not on Christ's own faithfulness.

Over the last generation of scholarship, however, there has been a decided move toward reading this phrase as referring to Christ's own faithfulness.<sup>20</sup> While this shift in scholarship has not made front-page news, it has had a significant impact on how we understand Paul's view of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. In particular, reading the phrase *pistis Christou* as referring to Jesus' own faithful obedience has invoked the much larger narrative of Jesus' life as an important component of Paul's theology. The *story* of Jesus for Paul, then, is not to be understood as a truncated emphasis on passion week alone; rather, Paul has in mind the larger narrative of Jesus' faithful ministry that results in his death. Thus the death of Jesus should not be read in isolation from the story of Jesus' ministry. While this is obviously the case with the Gospel accounts, the character of Paul's writings as occasional letters has resulted in a skewed emphasis on Jesus' death and resurrection, as if these were not intimately connected to his life. Part of the goal of those who see the story of Jesus' own faithfulness invoked by Paul is to redress this exaggerated focus on the death and resurrection of Jesus to the virtual total exclusion of Paul's implicit reflection on Jesus' faithful ministry as well.<sup>21</sup>

The significance of this reading of Paul becomes clear when we understand the function of Jesus' faithful obedience in Paul's retrospective theologizing about the life and death of Jesus from the vantage of the resurrection. There is a narrative to the development of this theology in Paul's life. It begins with Paul the faithful Pharisaic Jew, as Paul describes himself (Gal. 1; Phil. 3). This is Paul the zealous law-abiding Pharisee on his way to Damascus (Acts 9) to round up some of the wayward Jews who have come to believe that Jesus is God's crucified and risen messiah. But then Paul himself experiences a transforming vision of the risen Christ. He joins the movement he once had persecuted. In the process of making sense of

<sup>20</sup> Probably the most significant advocate of this view is Richard B. Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1 – 4:11*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002). The secondary literature is vast. See, e.g., Arland Hultgren, "The *Pistis Christou* Formulations in Paul," *NovT* 22 (1980): 248–263; Luke Johnson, "Rom 3:21–26 and the Faith of Jesus," *CBQ* 44 (1982): 77–90; Sam Williams, "The Righteousness of God in Romans," *JBL* 99 (1980): 241–290; Morna Hooker, "*Pistis Christou*," *NTS* 35 (1989): 321–342; and D. Campbell, "Romans 1:17: A *Crux Interpretum* for the *Pistis Christou* Debate," *JBL* 113 (1994): 265–285. See also the rejoinder to R. Hays by J.D.G. Dunn, "Once More, *Pistis Christou*," in Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ*, appendix 1, 249–271.

<sup>21</sup> See D.A. Brondox, *Paul on the Cross: Reconstructing the Apostle's Story of Redemption* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006, 63–102. See also M. Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul and His Letters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004).

everything, Paul comes to believe that because God raised Jesus from the dead, Jesus must indeed have been God's righteous messenger and, in addition, revealed as the very Son of God, who has come to bring salvation to Jew and Gentile alike. We can see this retrospection embedded in Galatians 2:2: "If justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing." Clearly Paul's starting point, in light of his revelatory experience, is that Christ must have died for *something*, and this something was nothing less than showing forth God's righteousness and genuine human righteousness alike, embodied in the same person, Jesus, apart from the law. Already a generation ago E.P. Sanders famously argued that Paul moves from solution to plight. If the death and resurrection of Jesus was God's solution to the human dilemma, then what must the plight have been but that observance of the Jewish law did not in the end bring about human righteousness (Rom. 3:21; Gal. 2:21)?<sup>22</sup> To be sure, Paul continued to work out this theological understanding throughout the course of his ministry as he addressed one pastoral situation after another – theology on the run, as it were. But this theological vision would contribute directly to the development of viewing Jesus as perfect and without sin.

It is because of Paul's characterization of Jesus as God's faithful and obedient son that Paul can relate Jesus' life, death, and resurrection to God's graceful response to human sin. Paul connects Jesus to human sinfulness in remarkable ways. Perhaps the most astonishing claim he makes is that "God made him to be sin who knew no sin" (2 Cor. 5:21). The larger context of this statement involves Paul's articulation of participation in the death of Christ: "we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died" (2 Cor. 5:14). Christ's death for all leads to life for all; just as all can identify with his death, so can they be confident of identifying with his resurrected life (2 Cor. 5:15). This new reality revealed in Christ gives one, in Paul's understanding, a view from on high – a view from God. "From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view [*kata sarka*]; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view [*kata sarka*], we know him no longer in that way." This is to say that if Paul and others had once considered Jesus only in human terms, his death and resurrection show a life that has revealed the character of God as a God who has been reconciling the world to himself, and not counting human trespasses. As Christ embodied the righteousness of God among humanity, so now Paul is

<sup>22</sup> Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 474–511. See also F. Thielman, *From Plight to Solution: A Jewish Framework for Understanding Paul's View of Law in Galatians and Romans* (Leiden: Brill, 1989).

confident that God made “him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21).<sup>23</sup>

What does Paul mean that Christ “knew no sin”? If one were to ask whether Paul thought Jesus ever did anything “wrong” or “unethical,” I suspect that Paul would likely respond with a rather quizzical look. It is not a matter of whether Jesus ever told a lie about stealing a cookie or spoke harshly to a Syrophoenician woman by calling her a dog. Rather, Paul was convinced by God’s raising Jesus from the dead that Jesus had not deserved the shamefully sinful death he received. His life showed a pattern of righteousness, not sin. That is what the resurrection revealed. In this case the whole is far more than the sum of the parts. Christ died because of his faithfulness to God, even though his life did not warrant such an accursed death.

Paul develops the notion of Christ taking on the curse of human sinfulness more explicitly in Galatians 3. There he writes, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us – for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’” (3:13). Paul quotes here from Deuteronomy 21:23, which addressed the case of capital punishment by hanging someone on a tree (akin to crucifixion and death by exposure). The law stipulates that “his corpse must not remain all night upon the tree; you shall bury him that same day, for anyone hung on a tree is under God’s curse” (Deut. 21:23). The understanding in Deuteronomy seems fairly straightforward that anyone guilty of a capital crime is surely under God’s curse. But Paul is not particularly interested in a contextual reading of Deuteronomy. Rather, in good first-century rabbinic fashion, Paul has found a proof text that will serve his purposes. His goal in this section is to explain the significance of Christ in light of his new understanding of the Jewish law. In Galatians 3:10 Paul establishes that “all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse,” because it is written that whoever does not observe and obey all the things in the book of the law is under a curse (referring to Deut. 27:26). Christ similarly suffers under the “curse of the law,” because he was “hung on a tree” – crucified. What does Paul mean by saying that “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (Gal. 3:13)? It is not unlike the argument he made in 2 Corinthians 5 – God

<sup>23</sup> Regarding 2 Cor. 5:21, B.H. McLean states that for Paul, “Christ does not become human in order to stand in solidarity with humanity but to stand in its place and to participate in a twofold imputation: he receives the burden of humanity’s sin while humanity receives God’s righteousness.” *The Cursed Christ: Mediterranean Expulsion Rituals and Pauline Soteriology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 112–113.

made him to be sin who knew no sin.<sup>24</sup> The emphasis is on what *God* has done in response to the faithful and obedient Christ, who does not deserve death. *God* made him to be sin. *God* accounted him as accursed for hanging on a tree. In making this kind of an argument Paul moves in the direction of casting Christ as victim, as sin offering, as sacrifice.<sup>25</sup> This is precisely the language Paul will use elsewhere (Rom. 3:21–26) to develop further the importance of Christ’s death – Christ as sacrifice.

Paul makes passing reference to Jesus as “our Passover sacrifice” in 1 Corinthians 5:7. In the context of condemning unethical behavior in Corinth (a man involved in sexual immorality with his stepmother, 1 Cor. 5:1), Paul warns the Corinthians that “a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough,” namely, that if they let such immorality go unchecked, it will infect the whole community. Therefore, they need to “clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch, as you really are unleavened” (1 Cor. 5:7). This language about leaven leads to a kind of stream-of-consciousness move on Paul’s part. It calls to mind for him the practice of removing leaven from the premises during Passover, which in turn results in Paul’s recollection of the death of Jesus during Passover, which then leads to an awkward reference to Christ as “our paschal lamb,” who has been sacrificed (1 Cor. 5:7).<sup>26</sup> The image hearkens back to Paul’s comment in 1 Corinthians 2:2 that he decided to know nothing among them except Christ and him crucified. Thus the crucifixion is interpreted here by Paul as a Passover sacrifice. Reflection on this sacrifice should lead the Corinthians to respond with new and reformed behavior: “Therefore, let us celebrate the festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (1 Cor. 5:8). The death of Jesus during Passover serves as a springboard for making a moral argument. The death and resurrection of Jesus has changed things, so they should live appropriately changed lives in response.

The classic passage where Paul presents the image of Jesus as God’s atoning sacrifice can be found in Romans 3:21–26, one of the thorniest passages in all of Paul’s letters. In Romans 1–3 Paul has established that

<sup>24</sup> So McLean, *The Cursed Christ*, 124.

<sup>25</sup> So J.L. Martyn, *Galatians* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 318; H.D. Betz, *Galatians* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 150–151.

<sup>26</sup> C.K. Barrett comments, “The great theme of Passover was deliverance . . . Christ as the Lamb of God summed up God’s action for the deliverance of his people; and the context suggests . . . that he delivered them by bearing for them the burden of their guilt and thus removing their sin.” *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 128.

both Jew and Gentile alike are guilty of sin before God, sin from which they cannot save themselves. Gentiles are idolatrous, even though they should recognize God in the natural world, but Gentiles have worshipped the creation rather than the Creator (Rom. 1:18–25). God has given special revelation to the Jews in the form of the law (Rom. 9:1–5), but they have responded with disobedience. And so Paul concludes in Romans 3:9, “we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin,” followed by various proof texts from the Jewish scriptures (Pss. 5:9; 10:7; 14:2–3; 36:1; 140:3; Isa. 59:7–8). How has God chosen to respond to the totality of human sin? Paul gives his explanation in Romans 3:21–26:

But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ [*dia pisteōs Iēsou Christou*] for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus [*pistis christou*]. (NRSV)

This is not by any stretch an easy passage to unpack, but it is certainly one of the most important passages in Paul’s letters to address the notion of Jesus as a sacrificial victim.<sup>27</sup> The language of sacrifice for sin is clear enough. God put Jesus Christ forward as a “sacrifice of atonement by his blood” (3:25, NRSV). The Greek term at issue here is *hilasterion*, about which there has been much debate. The different translations of this passage indicate the difficulties that interpreters have had here. The King James translation reads “whom God hath set forth to be a *propitiation* through faith in his blood.” The New American Bible has “whom God set forth as an *expiation*, through faith, by his blood.” And the New International Version renders it “God presented him as a *sacrifice of atonement*, through faith in his blood.” Either Jesus is the sacrifice of atonement

<sup>27</sup> See R. Jewett, *Romans* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2007), 268–293; B. Byrne, *Romans* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 122–135; J. Fitzmyer, *Romans* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 341–354; J.D.G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1988), 161–183; C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 199–218.

himself, calling to mind Yom Kippur – although the scapegoat bearing the sins of the people was not formally sacrificed but sent away into the wilderness – or he is the place of sacrifice that atones for sins. *God* is the main agent here, offering up Jesus to atone for human sin even apart from human repentance. God has passed over former sins. The imagery here involves the combination of Yom Kippur and Passover.<sup>28</sup> The language of “passing over” echoes the angel of death passing over the homes of the Hebrews marked with the blood of the lamb (Exod. 12:13). The language of atonement echoes the observance of Yom Kippur (Lev. 16). Like other early Christians, Paul struggles to find appropriate language to describe what he thinks has taken place in the Christ event. This is made all the more complicated because precisely in Romans 3 we find the much-debated *pistis Christou* phrase (3:22, 26). Is it the believer’s faith *in* Jesus that shows the righteousness of God? Or is it the faithfulness *of* Jesus that establishes the righteousness of God? Both motifs appear to be joined in the present passage. God has offered Jesus as an atoning sacrifice. Or is it better to say that God has recognized Jesus’ obedient faithfulness *as* an atoning sacrifice? In this view Jesus does not so much die *for* human sins as he dies *because of* human sinfulness. Here we have a blended understanding of Jesus’ death: God reckons the death of Jesus as a sacrificial atonement for human sin, sin that itself is epitomized in the unjust crucifixion of Jesus. But God is faithful, and so God raised the faithful Jesus to new life. It is through participation in this faithful obedience, dying to sin by being baptized into Christ’s death (Rom. 6:3), that Christians can experience the Spirit of Christ dwelling within them.<sup>29</sup> Believers can be confident, in turn, that this animating Spirit will lead to resurrected life with Christ. Paul will further develop such participationist language throughout Romans 5–7. In short, for Paul, if one wants to share in the apotheosis of the resurrected Christ, one must also share in his faithful cruciform death on behalf of others. This mystical union in the death of Christ, which Paul links to baptism in Romans 6, finds its ultimate transformation in new life within the church (the body of Christ) and finally beyond this earthly life in the resurrected life with God (1 Cor. 15).

<sup>28</sup> See J.S. Siker, “Yom Kippuring Passover: Recombinant Sacrifice in Early Christianity,” in C. Eberhardt, ed., *Ritual and Metaphor: Sacrifice in the Bible* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 2011), 65–82.

<sup>29</sup> See R. Tannehill, *Dying and Rising with Christ: A Study in Pauline Theology* (Berlin: Verlag Alfred Töpelmann, 1967), and A. Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998; originally published in 1931), 101–140.

## GOSPEL DEATHS

*The Markan Cross*

If Paul represents the earliest Christian writings we have, including his central focus on the cross, the Gospel of Mark is the earliest Gospel that we have, and again the cross will loom large here. Mark likely preserves many traditions from the ministry of Jesus that pre-date Paul's letters, but all of these traditions have been read from the perspective of Mark's post-resurrection faith. As with Paul, so also with Mark the death of Jesus is granted central stage in the unfolding narrative of Mark's Gospel. It is no accident that Mark has been referred to as a passion narrative with a long introduction.<sup>30</sup>

In reading Mark's Gospel, however, the centrality of the cross will not become evident until the central section of the Gospel in Mark 8–10. Though Mark is written in a very episodic style with awkward transitions from one story to the next, the overarching narrative has been written with great skill and with tremendous theological depth. The Gospel begins with a clear statement about the identity of Jesus; he is the Christ (messiah) and the Son of God (1:1). These titles will reappear in strategically significant contexts later in the Gospel. We will not hear about Jesus as the Christ again until Peter's confession in Mark 8:29, a turning point in the Gospel. After John the Baptist bears witness to Jesus (1:7–8), the Son of God title will appear in the baptism scene from the voice of God (1:11), echoed again in God's voice at the Transfiguration scene (9:7). We will hear tormented confessions that Jesus is the Son of God also from various demons that Jesus casts out (1:24; 3:11; 5:7). Significantly, Mark does not allow any human being to confess that Jesus is the Son of God until the declaration of the centurion at the foot of the cross after Jesus dies (15:39).

The entire first half of Mark's Gospel presents a powerful and authoritative Jesus who is in control of every situation. Not only does he cast out demons and heal people, he also claims the authority to forgive sins (2:5) – a claim that causes great scandal among the religious leaders (2:6–7), but a claim that Jesus backs up with a miraculous healing of a paralytic (2:9–10). Jesus defeats the scribes and Pharisees at every turn (see all of Mark 3), demonstrates tremendous power in various healing stories (see Mark 5), and even has power over nature, multiplying loaves (Mark 6:31–44; 8:1–9).

<sup>30</sup> First articulated by Martin Kähler in his influential *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964; originally published in 1892).



and calming chaotic seas (4:35–41). Jesus is clearly in charge during this first half of the Gospel.

The climax of the first half of Mark's Gospel comes in the form of Peter's Confession in 8:27–29:

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah."

This is the first time since 1:1 that Mark uses the term "Messiah" (Christ). The title has shifted from the voice of the narrator to the lips of Peter, speaking on behalf of the disciples. By confessing that Jesus is the Messiah Peter recognizes him as the one who will deliver the faithful from all political and religious oppression. And given everything that has preceded Peter's confession, it seems a fair statement to make. After all, has not Jesus demonstrated his power and authority in many ways, over illness, over demons, over religious opposition, over nature? But it is precisely at this point in the narrative that Mark pulls the rug out from under Peter, from his readers, and from traditional notions of the Messiah. For immediately following Peter's lofty confession comes the first of three astonishing passion predictions. In 8:31–33 we read:

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

It is difficult to exaggerate the sea-change that comes with this passage. Certainly Peter had the right confession – Jesus is the Messiah. And it would appear that he had the right meaning as well. After all, what could it mean that Jesus was the Messiah except the kind of power and authority he had been demonstrating all along? Power, glory, kingship, healing, the abundance of food, the restoration of Israel, the defeat of evil, the defeat of Rome – surely all this is what it meant that Jesus had come as Messiah. And yet now Jesus is talking about death? No wonder that Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him.

The language of "rebuke" here is remarkable, because this is the same term (*epitimaō*) Mark uses to describe Jesus' "rebuking" of demons when he

casts them out (1:25; 3:12).<sup>31</sup> Peter comes across as though he were casting out a demon, a death wish, from Jesus. But Jesus' response is even stronger in reaction against Peter's rebuke. Jesus castigates Peter and even goes so far as to call him "Satan." Peter is the one with demonic troubles, not Jesus. Peter wants to stick with the power and the glory. That had been working just fine. Why introduce suffering and death at this point? The reason, of course, is that Mark has no choice but to introduce suffering and death in light of Jesus' approaching crucifixion. It must be introduced at some point, and this rather dramatic method makes a central theological point. The desire for human power and glory, Mark says in short, is demonic. The willingness to embrace and so to transform human suffering, by contrast, is redemptive and comes from God, even if that embrace leads to death, even crucifixion. In this way Mark redefines traditional notions of power associated with the title "Messiah" or "Christ." The true power of Christ is to be found in his passion. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it" (8:34–35). Like Paul, for Mark the good news about Jesus is ironically found in the cross of Christ.

The second and third passion predictions are no less important for Mark. In 9:30–32 Jesus repeats the passion prediction, and we are told that the disciples did not understand him and were afraid to ask. Then more irony, as immediately after this passion prediction Mark tells the story of the disciples fighting with each other over which one of them is the greatest (9:33–34). Jesus has just made this sober passion prediction, but the disciples are clueless (as they are throughout Mark), responding to this rather difficult news by appealing again to the power and glory model to which they had grown accustomed and attached in Mark 1–8. Similarly the third, final, and longest passion prediction (10:32–34) details what actually happens in Jesus' death:

They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him

<sup>31</sup> This is also the same term used in Mark 4:39 where Jesus rebukes the chaotic wind and so calms the stormy sea to the utter astonishment of his disciples, who ask: "Who is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again."

The emphasis is remarkable. The Son of Man will be handed over, condemned to death, handed over, mocked, spit upon, flogged, killed – and only then after three days he will rise again. All of the emphasis falls on the suffering and death of Jesus. But Mark interjects still more irony immediately after this last and longest passion prediction. No sooner does Jesus utter these words than two of the disciples respond by asking to be seated at Jesus' right hand in glory when the kingdom comes (10:35–41).

Each of the three passion predictions makes use of the much-debated Christological title "Son of Man." Mark appeals to this title in three ways. First, Mark takes over the image of the present earthly prophetic Son of Man, already found in God's constant address to the prophet Ezekiel as "son of man" (see Ezekiel 2–3). This motif appears in Mark 2:10, where Jesus heals the paralytic "that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins," and again in 2:28 where "the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath." Jesus speaks the powerful prophetic words of God in the present age. Second, Mark takes over the image of the future heavenly apocalyptic Son of Man, already found in the book of Daniel. Indeed, in 13:26 Mark even quotes the relevant passage from Daniel 7:13: "Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming with clouds of with great power and glory.'" This future apocalyptic Son of Man makes another appearance on the lips of Jesus in Mark 8:38: "Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

But it is the third use of the "Son of Man" title that has drawn the most attention – Mark's introduction for the first time anywhere of a "suffering Son of Man," an apparent blending of the Son of Man imagery from Ezekiel and Daniel with a good dose of the Suffering Servant figure from Isaiah 53 thrown in for good measure. The image of a "suffering Son of Man" appears to be a Markan invention, created to address the reality that Mark and other Christians had in fact experienced: the contradictory reality that this powerful agent of God, this Messiah, this Son of Man, had been put to death, indeed crucified. How should this radical shift in expectations be addressed? There was only one way to deal with it: this apparently tragic and humiliating death of Jesus must in fact be understood as part of God's plan. And not only that, but the ultimate expression of power can be found not in the miraculous deeds of Jesus but in his full embrace of human suffering on the cross. The death of Jesus becomes the focus in Mark, which also accounts for

the very muted report of the resurrection, where Mark includes no appearance stories in the original ending of the Gospel (16:1–8). This death of Jesus will have the power to atone, to function as a ransom for human sinfulness (10:45). Salvation occurs through the death of Jesus, with the resurrection a mute affirmation of this salvation.

Finally, Mark's last reference to Jesus as the Son of God appears dramatically on the lips of a Gentile centurion at the foot of the cross (15:39). This is the only human being to confess Jesus as the Son of God. Not Peter, not John the Baptist, not Mary Magdalene. Only this centurion who has just executed Jesus, who represents the ultimate coercive power of Rome to kill, confesses Jesus as the Son of God. The scene is ironic in the extreme, something we miss after 2,000 years, for here a Roman soldier is presented as looking up at this dead, naked, Jewish criminal – Jesus – and he confesses that this man is the Son of God. Mark has Roman coercive power bow before the power of one who radically embraced human suffering, only to suffer and die himself. Whether such a scene ever took place is frankly beyond what we can know with any historical certainty. In terms of Mark's retrospective theologizing of the death of Jesus, however, this scene works extremely well as a complete identification of Jesus' suffering and death with his identity as the Son of God. The cross is where, for Mark, one ultimately knows the true and full identity of Jesus as the Son of God, a title that now brackets the beginning and end of the Gospel, a title that echoes a rather different understanding at the end of the narrative than it had at the beginning. As with the titles of Christ and Son of Man, so Mark has now completely recast the notion of Jesus as the Son of God in the shadow of the cross. Far from an emblem of shame, the death of Jesus on the cross has become for Mark, as it was for Paul, a badge of honor; it has become the true mark of God's salvific revelation in Christ. Even a Gentile centurion can bear testimony to the real identity of Jesus, highlighted as it is by the centrality of this cruciform Jesus. In his embrace of human suffering Mark sees God's redemptive embrace of human weakness and sin. In the death of Jesus on the cross Mark sees God's transforming work of bringing life and healing to those who have experienced only death and despair. Mark has turned the tragic and stunning death of Jesus into the ultimate sign of God's triumph over death.

The Eucharistic language of Jesus at the last supper with his disciples provides a further interpretation of Jesus' death in Mark's Gospel, again in retrospect. Mark 14 begins with the anointing of Jesus in Bethany, just outside Jerusalem, two days before Passover. A woman anoints his head with expensive perfume, a symbol of royal anointing, which Mark has Jesus interpret as anointing his body for burial. This story is followed by the last

supper on the first day of Passover. In this context Jesus is portrayed as giving new meaning to the traditional bread and wine from the Passover meal. The bread is his body; the wine is his blood, the blood of the covenant, poured out for many (14:22–24; 10:45).<sup>32</sup> This rereading of the Passover Seder into a Eucharistic institution makes the death of Jesus the liberating event for God's people. The sacrificial overtones here are unmistakable, weakly developed as they are.

### *The Matthean Fulfillment of Righteousness*

In large measure Matthew follows Mark's lead in presenting the death of Jesus. As we already saw in the chapter on the birth of Jesus, Matthew telegraphs Jesus' death precisely in the midst of announcing his birth: "You shall name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). How will he save them from sins? Because the reader already knows the end of the story, it becomes quite clear that the birth of the messiah will result in the saving death of the messiah, to be confirmed by his glorious resurrection. How exactly the death will be a saving death is not spelled out.

For Matthew, the death of Jesus makes sense as the fulfillment of God's divine plan. This is especially evident in the scene of Jesus' arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane. When one of Jesus' followers draws his sword to defend Jesus, Jesus responds (Matt. 26:52–56):

"Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?" At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, "Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me. But all this has taken place, so that the scriptures of the prophets may be fulfilled."

Only in Matthew do we find this statement that Jesus could appeal to more than twelve legions of angels to come to his defense, if he wanted that to happen. But then the scriptures would not be fulfilled. Everything has taken place, for Matthew, so that the scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled. This is true of the birth of Jesus, his baptism, his ministry, and no less of his death (and resurrection). The death of Jesus should not be mistaken for

<sup>32</sup> See J. Marcus, *Mark 8–16* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 956–968, and A. Y. Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2007), 653–657.

weakness or powerlessness on God's or Jesus' part. Rather, ironically, this shameful death is precisely the way to the fullest expression of God's power and the vindication of Jesus' righteousness against his opponents. Precisely *which* scriptures Matthew has in view here is not immediately clear. Rather this is another case of generic proof texting, a common feature of early Christian appropriations of their Jewish scriptures. Matthew can certainly cite specific proof texts elsewhere (see, e.g., Matt. 1 and 2), but here the author is satisfied with generic assertion rather than specific citation.

Most important in this context is Matthew's retrospective theologizing about the death of Jesus in light of his conviction that Jesus has been raised from the dead. The resurrection shows that Jesus' death must have been both necessary and part of God's plan that fulfilled scripture. Although the suffering and death of a Jewish messiah was not a feature of first-century Jewish messianic expectations before Jesus, Matthew's point is that in light of Jesus' death and resurrection everything now makes sense, from birth to baptism, from ministry to salvific death. This messiah has now saved his people from their sins by dying a sacrificial death on the cross. In this respect Matthew follows Mark's Jesus in stating that "the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28; Mark 10:45). Why was it necessary for Jesus to die? Because in retrospect Matthew has come to believe, along with many other early Christians, that Jesus' death fulfilled the scriptures of old. He died as God's servant in order to give life to others.

What is the connection in Matthew between the death of Jesus and his sinlessness? This is not actually how Matthew frames the question or his response. Matthew subsumes the entire question of perfection and sin under the dualistic rubric of righteousness and wickedness. From the birth story to the death of Jesus Matthew's concern is whether or not one is found righteous in God's eyes. Matthew tells us that Joseph, Mary's betrothed, was a righteous man (1:19). Matthew's Jesus interpreted his baptism by John as fulfilling all righteousness (3:15; 21:32). His ministry involved calling sinners to repent and turn toward the path of righteousness (4:17; 9:13). Those who are righteous are blessed by God (5:6, 10). Matthew sets up the Pharisees as false models of righteousness (5:20; 23:1–39). Indeed, God's final judgment will bring about an eternal division between those who are truly righteous and those who are wicked (10:41; 13:17, 49). Nowhere can this be seen more clearly than in Matthew's parable of the sheep and the goats, found only in Matthew (25:31–46), where the Son of Man will sit on his throne and separate the righteous from the wicked in the final judgment. Thus, for Matthew, the language of righteousness is the overarching

category. As the Son of God, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham (1:1), Jesus is the ultimate model and embodiment of the righteousness of God. He brings healing and reconciliation to those broken by illness and sin. From Matthew's apocalyptic and dualistic worldview of either/or, Jesus' righteousness functions to define Jesus as sinless, perfect from birth to death, confirmed by his resurrection from the dead. He fulfills all righteousness. He calls sinners to righteousness. By implication he has become all righteousness in perfect sinlessness.

### *The Lukan Martyr*

Nowhere does Luke differ from the other Gospels so much as in his depiction of Jesus' death and the significance of this death in relation to sin. Far from emphasizing Jesus as distraught, abandoned, and enduring great anguish, Luke stresses a Jesus still in control of the situation, a Jesus who trusts in God's powerful presence, and a Jesus who continues his ministry even while on the cross. This Jesus does not die a sacrificial death that atones for sin; rather, Luke's Jesus dies the death of a martyr who trusted in God to the end, and whom God rewarded with a glorious and powerful resurrection. As much as Mark subordinates the glory of Jesus to the cross, Luke subordinates the cross in order to glorify Jesus as God's ultimate messiah-prophet who identifies with the outsiders and turns the tables on the insiders.

Unlike Matthew's birth story that invokes a sacrificial death by presenting a Jesus who will save his people from their sins, implicitly through his death, Luke's birth narrative announces a Jesus who will go from glory to glory, even as he is born among the lowly (Luke 1:32–33): "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Luke has Mary respond to this angelic message with what amounts to a song of triumph even before Jesus is born. Mary basically preaches the central message of Luke's Gospel in her song of praise, the Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55):

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant . . .  
He has shown strength with his arm;  
He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel,  
 in remembrance of his mercy,  
 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
 to Abraham and to his descendants forever.

There is nothing here about dying to save his people from their sins. Rather, Luke has Mary state quite clearly the motif of reversal and the inclusion of the lowly and the hungry, anticipating the thrust of Jesus' message in his inaugural sermon in Nazareth (Luke 4:16–30) and his Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6). This inclusion of the outcast brings with it God's striking exclusion of the powerful and the rich, even those who presume they are insiders.

Whereas Mark and Matthew both can have Jesus speak of the Son of Man who gives his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45; Matt. 20:28), Luke will have none of this sacrificial death. Luke leaves out this passage. Instead, from Gethsemane to the cross and resurrection, Luke's Jesus remains in control and in charge of all that happens. He is never the passive victim led to slaughter; rather, he is the active martyr whose death brings the sure victory of resurrection. He is empowered by the Holy Spirit throughout the Gospel. And when he gives up this Spirit on his death (Luke 23:46), the resurrected Jesus tells his disciples in the Acts of the Apostles (Luke 24:49; Acts 2) that this same Spirit will come upon them and empower them in their ministries.

While Mark and Matthew both present the death of Jesus as an ultimate revelatory event of Jesus' identity, as on Jesus' death the centurion confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, Luke's presentation of Jesus' death is far different.<sup>33</sup> Rather than showing Jesus as bearing the sins of the people upon the cross, Luke's Jesus continues his ministry – forgiving the people (“for they know not what they do,” Luke 23:34) and promising salvation to the penitent thief being crucified next to him (Luke 23:43). And when a very controlled Jesus dies, the centurion simply states, “This man was innocent [*dikaïos*]” (Luke 23:47). He dies the death of a martyr for the cause, as did the prophets before him. And when Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gives his long address in Acts 7, Luke has him place Jesus precisely in this long line of prophets who were unjustly killed. And then Stephen suffers the same fate, as the crowd stones him to death when he bears witness to a vision of the resurrected Jesus sitting at the right hand of God. Luke even has Stephen imitate the same words of Jesus on the cross: “do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60) and “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” (Acts 7:59). The

<sup>33</sup> See J. Carroll and J. Green, eds., *The Death of Jesus in Early Christianity* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 60–81.



difference, of course, is that whereas Jesus commended his spirit to God, now Stephen commends his spirit to the risen Jesus.

How does Luke explain the death of Jesus and its significance? Luke is quite straightforward about this. The death of Jesus finds an explanation only from the perspective of the risen Jesus. When the disciples on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24 share their dismay about the death of Jesus with the unrecognized risen Jesus, the risen Christ proceeds to state (Luke 24:25–27): “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.” The death of Jesus is presented as being in accordance with the prophets. Luke’s claim is simply that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and die and then enter into glory by means of resurrection from the dead. In short, in Luke’s Gospel Jesus dies in order to be raised from the dead in glory. The logic of Luke’s argument runs something like this: if the death of Jesus was not necessary, he would not have died, but because he died (in order to be raised), it must have been necessary. This approaches tautology, but from the retrospective vantage of belief in the risen Jesus this explanation has the advantage of focusing on the resurrection and downplaying the suffering of Jesus throughout his passion. Hence, in comparison to Mark and Matthew, only Luke’s Jesus continues his ministry by healing the ear of the servant in the Garden of Gethsemane during the arrest scene; only Luke’s Jesus does not throw himself in anguish to the ground praying for God to remove the cup of death set before him; only Luke’s Jesus does not utter the cry of abandonment from the cross about being forsaken by God.

We find the same pattern later in Luke 24 when the risen Jesus appears again to the disciples. Because there was no understanding of a dying and rising messiah, the followers of Jesus needed to have their eyes opened so they could read their Scriptures properly. The risen Jesus does exactly this. As Luke puts it in 24:46–47: “Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.’” The formulaic introduction “Thus it is written” clearly suggests that from Luke’s perspective the risen Jesus is quoting some passage from the Jewish scriptures. The difficulty, however, is that no such passage is found in the Jewish scriptures. This is merely an assertion that the scriptures speak about a suffering (and dying) and rising messiah. The followers of

Jesus are simply to understand that the death and resurrection of Jesus is in accordance with the scriptures. This kind of theology by assertion is not uncommon, and Luke is only giving voice to what the Christians of his day had in fact come to believe.

But the passage asserts more than that scripture speaks about a suffering/dying and rising messiah. It also states that “repentance and forgiveness of sins” is to be proclaimed in the name of Jesus. Does not this passage make a clear connection between the death of Jesus and forgiveness of sins? Is not Luke here implicitly presenting the notion of an atoning death? I would argue against this interpretation for one fundamental reason: the proclamation of repentance and forgiveness of sins is found throughout the public ministry of Jesus in Luke’s Gospel, and in that narrative it never has anything to do with the death of Jesus. When Jesus forgives the “woman of the city” for her sins in Luke 7, there is no connection to Jesus’ death. Similarly, when Zacchaeus the tax collector repents in Luke 19, and gives half of his possessions to the poor as a sign of this repentance, this has nothing to do with the death of Jesus. The “repentance and forgiveness of sins” referred to in Luke 24 simply reiterates the same repentance and forgiveness that has already been seen in the preaching of John the Baptist and in several other narratives in Luke’s Gospel. Forgiveness of sins finds connection, then, with the ministry of Jesus and not with his death.<sup>34</sup>

Could not God have simply caught Jesus up into the heavenly world in a fiery chariot, as happened with the prophet Elijah before him? Luke is familiar with other Elijah motifs, for example, the story of Elijah and the widow from Zaraphath (1 Kings 17:7–16) to which Luke has Jesus refer in Luke 4 and then imitate in Luke 7.<sup>35</sup> Certainly God *could* have done this. But in point of fact, this is not how the story of Jesus went. Rather, Jesus was put to death. And so Luke has no choice but to argue that Jesus was put to death because that was a necessary part of God’s plan. Why? Because that’s the way it happened. *Why does Jesus have to die? Because he did die.*

Finally, Luke gives us one more clue about the significance of Jesus’ death. During the last supper scene, after Jesus foretells that Peter will deny him three times, only Luke has Jesus add the following statement in speaking to his disciples (Luke 22:37): “I tell you, this scripture must be fulfilled in me, “And he was counted among the lawless”; and indeed what is written about me is being fulfilled.” This citation comes from Isaiah 53:12, which reads:

<sup>34</sup> See further Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 1031–1069.

<sup>35</sup> See J.S. Siker, “‘First to the Gentiles’: A Literary Analysis of Luke 4:16–30,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111 (1992): 69–86.

Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great,  
 and he shall divide the spoil with the strong;  
 because he poured out himself to death,  
 and was numbered with the transgressors;  
 yet he bore the sin of many,  
 and made intercession for the transgressors.

Isaiah 53 provided one of the most important proof texts for early Christians as they sought to make sense of Jesus' death in light of their sacred scriptures.<sup>36</sup> Most striking about Luke's use of this passage from Isaiah 53:12 is his selective citation of the passage, so that the focus falls on the identity of Jesus with "transgressors" (*anomoí* in the Septuagint version Luke used, a term that literally means "lawless"). Just as Jesus was born among the lowly, so now he will die as one among other transgressors – like the thieves justly executed on either side of him. And yet Luke does not include a rather significant portion of the Isaiah 53:12 passage – the notion that "he bore the sin of many." Luke steers away from the sacrificial overtones of Jesus' death that other early Christians held on to tightly. In this way Luke sounds a discordant note in relation to other early Christians who interpreted Jesus' death in primarily sacrificial tones.<sup>37</sup> We will see such an emphasis on sacrifice in the Gospel of John, to which we now turn our attention.

### *The Johannine Lamb of God, Who Takes Away the Sin of the World*

If Luke shied away from closely linking Jesus' death to forgiveness of sins, the Gospel of John takes things in the opposite direction by strongly emphasizing the connection between Jesus' death and forgiveness of sins. The key passage here is the scene with John the Baptist bearing witness to Jesus as "the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:35). Here the fourth evangelist telegraphs at the outset of the Gospel the basic message of the Gospel as a whole: Jesus will die a sacrificial death for the sins

<sup>36</sup> See M. Hooker, *Jesus and the Servant: The Influence of the Servant Concept of Deutero-Isaiah in the New Testament* (London: SPCK, 1959); W. Farmer, ed., *Jesus and the Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 and Christian Origins* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity International Press, 1998); and J. Sawyer, *The Fifth Gospel: Isaiah in the History of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>37</sup> See P.J. Scaer, *The Lukan Passion and the Praiseworthy Death* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005). Scaer argues that Luke appropriates the "noble death" tradition from both Greco-Roman (Cicero, Pseudo-Cicero, Plutarch) and Hellenistic Jewish (Maccabees, Josephus) sources and interprets the death of Jesus in light of this tradition. See also J. W. van Henten and F. Avemarie, *Martyrdom and Noble Death* (London: Routledge, 2002).

of all. (This is similar to the naming of Jesus in Matthew 1:21: “name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”)

The Lamb of God imagery here is especially intriguing. On the one hand, reference to the Lamb of God marks a straightforward connection to the Passover ritual, particularly with John’s Gospel placing the death of Jesus at the same time that the Passover lambs were being sacrificed in the Temple on the “day of preparation” (John 19:14). On the other hand, there actually is no connection between the first part of John the Baptist’s statement (“Behold the Lamb of God”) and the second part of his statement (“who takes away the sin of the world”). The sacrifice of the Passover lamb, indeed the entire festival of Passover, had nothing to do with the forgiveness of sins. The Passover lamb was *not* a sacrifice of atonement. And yet as the earliest Christians were making sense of the death of Jesus, they introduced precisely this connection. How did this connection arise for John’s Gospel? I would argue that the early Christian linkage of the Passover lamb with forgiveness of sins shows a kind of recombinant ritualizing on the part of the Christian community as it sought to make sense of Jesus’ death out of its Jewish context. In short, early Christians took the other most significant holy day in Jewish tradition, Yom Kippur, and imported its central emphasis on forgiveness of sins into the immediate ritual imagination of Passover. Thus, early Christians engaged in the process of “Yom Kippuring” Passover, a kind of recombinant theologizing of central Jewish rituals in the service of Christian efforts to make sense of Jesus’ death in light of the Jewish tradition in which John’s Gospel was steeped. Just as the paschal lamb had saved the Hebrews from the angel of death in ancient Egypt, so now Jesus as the paschal lamb had saved God’s people from their sins. Why else would he have died? Why else would he have *had* to die, as the earliest Christians saw things?

As the Johannine Christians, among others, reflected on Jesus’ death and resurrection in light of their Jewish scriptures and Jewish rituals, they came to the conviction that Jesus died as a sacrificial victim, a sacrifice of atonement, a Yom Kippur sacrifice in the context of Passover.<sup>38</sup> If the early Jewish Christians came to understand the death of Jesus in sacrificial terms, though, what are the implications? First, like any appropriate sacrifice for the Temple, Jesus must meet the standards of a sacrifice. Jewish scriptures actually say relatively little about such standards. Leviticus 22:22–24 spells

<sup>38</sup> On Yom Kippur in early Christianity, see especially D. Stökl Ben Ezra, *The Impact of Yom Kippur on Early Christianity: The Day of Atonement from Second Temple Judaism to the Fifth Century* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003).

out some of them. Any animal brought to the altar for sacrifice must be ritually pure. This means that all animals must be free at least of the following defects: “Anything blind, or injured, or maimed, or having a discharge, or an itch, or scabs – these you shall not offer to the Lord . . . . An ox or a lamb that has a limb too long or too short you may present for a freewill offering; but it will not be accepted for a vow. Any animal that has its testicles bruised or crushed or torn or cut you shall not offer to the Lord; such you shall not do within your land.”<sup>39</sup> The priests and rabbis, of course, expanded on this list as they sought to be faithful to God.<sup>40</sup> But the basic requirements are there.

When the average pilgrim went to Jerusalem for the Passover festival he or she could count on plenty of ritually appropriate sacrificial animals to be ready for purchase, in this case lambs. There were priests and Levites regulating the sacrificial process of the Temple so that only ritually pure animals would be sacrificed. They would check for obvious blemishes – sores, bad teeth, broken bones, spots, and the like. The general idea was that you were to present your best to God and not try to get away with sacrificing a less than ideal animal.

The Gospel of John goes out of its way to make it quite clear that Jesus was indeed an appropriate sacrificial victim: “The Jews . . . asked Pilate to have the legs of the crucified men broken and the bodies removed (since it was the Day of Preparation). Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who had been crucified with him. But then they came to

<sup>39</sup> Although various terms are used for “unblemished” or “spotless” both in the Hebrew text and in the LXX translation that would have been used by the early Christians, the most common term is a form of *amōmos*. For example, Exod. 12:5 states, “Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats.” The term translated in English as “without blemish” was rendered in Greek (LXX) as a *probaton teleion*, literally a “perfect sheep,” but with the clear meaning of being unblemished. Exod. 29:1 instructs, “Take one young bull and two rams without blemish.” The Greek translation of the Hebrew is *amōmos*, where the term literally means “without mark” or “blameless” (again, with no moral overtone). The same term can be found in Lev. 1:3, 10. Lev. 22:19 states, “You shall not offer anything that has a blemish (*mōmon*), for it will not be acceptable in your behalf.” Deut. 15:21 states, “But if it has any defect– any serious defect (*mōmos ponēros*), such as lameness or blindness– you shall not sacrifice it to the LORD your God.” Similarly Deut. 17:1: “You must not sacrifice to the LORD your God an ox or a sheep that has a defect (*mōmos*), anything seriously wrong; for that is abhorrent to the LORD your God.” See also Ezek. 43:23; Mal. 1:8; and Mal. 1:14, where the term *diephtharmenon* (“spoiled, ruined”) is used to designate a blemished animal sacrifice.

<sup>40</sup> See, e.g., Leviticus Rabbah, as well as the *Mishnah Tractate Yoma* (on the observance of Yom Kippur) and *Tractate Zebahim* (on animal offerings). The rabbis continued to debate the sacrificial regulations long after the destruction of the Second Temple.

Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs . . . These things occurred so that the Scripture might be fulfilled, ‘None of his bones shall be broken’” – a reference to Exodus 12:46 regarding the Passover lamb (John 19:31–36).

Thus Jesus is a ritually pure sacrificial victim – without spot or blemish. But an animal appropriate for sacrifice has, of course, only a *ritual* standing. Animals do not have *moral* standing. It does not matter whether the animal was a good animal or a bad animal (whatever that might mean) as long as it was ritually pure. And this is where the transfer of sacrificial imagery to Jesus takes its crucial turn. Whereas an animal has no moral standing, every person by definition does have a moral standing. Thus, when the imagery of a sacrificial animal is mapped onto Jesus as an unblemished victim, it automatically takes on moral overtones. If Jesus is a human being functioning as a sacrifice, he must have been not only ritually pure but *morally* pure as well. Here we see a transition from the physicality of ritual purity, where the notion of “without blemish” is meant quite literally, to a spiritualization of ritual purity that refers to the disposition of the human heart, and in this case (the only case) to the spiritual purity, the spiritual perfection of Jesus as a human being. This spiritual perfection leads directly to a moral perfection. Jesus becomes unblemished in both spirit and in action. His words and deeds are blameless, sinless (they never miss the target), because his actions are but a reflection of his inner spirit, pure and blameless. Thus his shameful and sinful death precisely becomes the vehicle, in view of the resurrection, for demonstrating his righteousness and his unblemished life. This kind of retrospection leads to the conviction that because Jesus was spiritually and morally without spot or blemish, then he must have been a perfect human being, and so a perfect sacrifice. Hebrews 4 makes this claim directly – that Jesus is the great high priest who makes the atoning sacrifice of himself in the heavenly temple. His sacrifice is acceptable because he is in every respect like all human beings, *yet without sin* (Heb. 4:14). This is simply a further elaboration of John the Baptist’s declaration at the beginning of the Gospel of John that Jesus is the “lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” The status of Jesus as perfect allows John to link him to a perfect preexistence with God and a subsequent perfect incarnation as the Word become flesh (1:1–14).

#### FROM RITUAL PURITY TO MORAL PERFECTION

To follow this move from ritual to spiritual/moral purity in early Christian reflection on Jesus it is helpful to attend to the specifics of the Yom Kippur

ritual as articulated in the classic text from Leviticus 16.<sup>41</sup> Yom Kippur was (and remains) the culmination of the High Holy Days in Jewish tradition. In the Hebrew calendar Yom Kippur is observed on the tenth day of Tishrei, the seventh month (typically late September or early October). The basic ritual began with the High Priest offering a young bull as a sin offering for himself so as to make atonement for himself and his house (Lev. 16:6). He then took two male goats from the congregation of the people of Israel, set them before the Lord, and cast lots on the two goats. One lot was for the Lord, and the other lot was for Azazel, namely, a scapegoat. The goat designated for the Lord was sacrificed as a sin offering, and its blood was then ritually sprinkled over various parts of the Temple, especially on the altar to cleanse it from sin and so prepare it for another year of sacrifice. In this way the High Priest made atonement for the people in relationship to the Temple itself.

Only after the Temple had been thus cleansed was the second goat, the scapegoat, presented alive before the people. At this point the High Priest “shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat, and sending it away into the wilderness by means of someone designated for the task. The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a barren region; and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness” (Lev. 16:21–22). According to Jewish tradition, the scapegoat was either thrown off a cliff to its death, or it fell to its death.<sup>42</sup> A variety of other concluding rituals followed the release of the scapegoat. The observance of Yom Kippur was enjoined on the people of Israel as “an everlasting statute for you, to make atonement for the people of Israel once in the year for all their sins” (Lev. 16:34).

The observance of the scapegoat ritual in which the goat bears away the sins of the people was not only a powerful image, but – lest we forget – the actual ritual practice of the Jerusalem Temple in the time of Jesus and the earliest Christian Jews. It was a time of solemn repentance and fasting. It also marked a time of renewal for the people, for the High Priest, and for the Temple itself. By ritually purifying people, priest, and Temple, the observance of Yom Kippur allowed for the ongoing effectiveness of the Temple cult and the prescribed sacrificial activity that helped Israel to maintain covenant fidelity with God.

Early Christians did not lightly associate the retrospective significance of the death of Jesus with the meaning of Yom Kippur. Indeed, it appears that the experiences of the death and resurrection of Jesus was galvanizing in the

<sup>41</sup> See the commentary of J. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 1009–1058.

<sup>42</sup> See Stökl Ben Ezra, *The Impact of Yom Kippur on Early Christianity*, 18–77.

extreme for his followers. Their experiences compelled them to reflect deeply on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus in light of the most significant aspects of their Jewish faith and practice, their scriptures and rituals. And so the tragedy of another prophet put to death became, in light of the resurrection, a glorious tragedy of sacrifice and redemption modeled after the ritualizing of sacrifice and redemption they knew so well from the Jerusalem Temple. The animal sacrifices in the Temple were simply part of their world, indeed, part of Jesus' own world. Just as the people, the High Priest, and the Temple were renewed by the rituals of Yom Kippur, so the followers of Jesus experienced themselves as renewed and transformed by the combination of Jesus' shameful death and unexpected resurrection from the dead. Just as the death of the scapegoat bore away the sins of the people, so now the followers of Jesus began to imagine the sinful death of Jesus as an atoning death for sinners. The Passover lamb was a symbol of freedom from slavery in Egypt, and now the notion of Jesus as a sacrificial lamb began to take shape, blending and blurring Passover ritual with both Yom Kippur meaning and texts such as Isaiah 53:7 ("like a lamb that is led to the slaughter"), a crucified victim whose death made sense only in light of resurrection. This crucified Passover lamb must have died to free God's people, but not from Rome, at least not yet. And so the followers of Jesus began to weave new connections between the paschal lamb and the scapegoat, between freedom and sin.

Just as the deaths of the Maccabean martyrs were connected in Jewish tradition to atonement for the people,<sup>43</sup> and just as the near-sacrifice of Isaac was understood to have an atoning effect,<sup>44</sup> so the followers of Jesus could draw the same connections. Only in the case of Jesus they came to believe that he had been raised from the dead, which infinitely magnified the significance of his death. His death became identified with the combined meaning of the ritual imagery associated with Passover, Yom Kippur, and Temple sacrifice, all bound together by intense reflection on the Jewish Scriptures and any echoes therein of Jesus' life and death. The early Christians were able to create

<sup>43</sup> See especially 4 Macc. 6:30, where before his martyrdom Eleazar prays to God, "Be merciful to your people, and let my punishment suffice for them. Make my blood their purification, and take my life in exchange for theirs." A similar reflection of vicarious suffering can be seen in 2 Macc. 7:37–38. See J. W. van Henten, *The Maccabean Martyrs as Saviors of the Jewish People: A Study of 2 and 4 Maccabees* (Leiden: Brill, 1997).

<sup>44</sup> See S. Spiegel, *The Last Trial: On the Legends and Lore of the Command to Abraham to Offer Isaac as a Sacrifice, the Akedah* (New York: Schocken, 1967); E. Kessler, *Bound by the Bible: Jews, Christians, and the Sacrifice of Isaac* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); J. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 111–142.



a new and powerful meaning for the death of Jesus – atonement brought about by the offering of a perfect sacrifice once and for all (Heb. 7:27; 9:12).

#### PASSOVER, YOM KIPPUR, AND THE *AKEDAH*

An added dimension to the retheologizing of Jesus' death at Passover by importing the atoning meaning of Yom Kippur is the prominence of the *akedah* (the binding of Isaac) tradition from Genesis 22. The pseudoepigraphical *Book of Jubilees*, typically dated to the late second century BCE, retells various stories from the biblical book of Genesis. Jubilees 17:15–18:16 retells the story of the binding of Isaac. Jubilees notes that the date of the *akedah* is the fifteenth of Nissan, the beginning of Passover in the Jewish calendar.<sup>45</sup> Thus there may well have been associations among first-century Jewish Christians that Jesus died the same day as their patriarch Isaac, who had, after all, been offered up in virtual sacrifice. Nothing is said regarding Isaac's sinlessness, but Isaac is seen as one who is obedient not only to his father, Abraham, but to God. In another version of the story, this time from Qumran, we find this older Isaac telling his father to bind him fast (4 Q 225 or 4 Q Pseudo-Jubilees). Later rabbinic traditions can even speak as if Isaac had been sacrificed or that part of his blood was shed, with atoning effect.<sup>46</sup> The very language of sacrifice that is so embedded in the Isaac story provided further commentary on which early Christians could reflect in making sense of another willing sacrifice, Jesus. The *akedah* simply becomes one more component piece that contributed to the sacrificial understanding of Jesus' death, now blended, indeed congealed, with the Passover lamb and the Yom Kippur scapegoat.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>45</sup> See J.C. Vanderkam, "The Aqedah, Jubilees, and Pseudo-Jubilees," in *The Quest for Context and Meaning*, ed. C.A. Evans and S. Talmon (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 241–261; P.R. Davies, "Passover and the Dating of the Aqedah," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 30 (1979): 59–67; and J.A. Fitzmyer, "The Sacrifice of Isaac in Qumran Literature," *Biblica* 83 (2002): 211–229.

<sup>46</sup> See, e.g., Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, 41, where Spiegel refers to the tradition linked to R. Eleazar ben Pedat: "Although Isaac did not die, Scripture accounts it to him as *though* he had died and his ashes lay on top of the altar" (emphasis his, with reference to *Sefer ha-Yashar*, 81). On "the blood of Isaac's Aqedah," see the Introduction by J. Goldin in Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, xxiv.

<sup>47</sup> See J. Swetnam, *Jesus and Isaac: A Study of the Epistle to the Hebrews in the Light of the Aqedah* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1981).

## From Sin to Perfection

**I**T REMAINS FOR US TO EXPLORE BRIEFLY THREE FINAL WRITINGS of the New Testament and examine their appeals to the perfection of Jesus and his atoning death for sin. In turn we will see how this perfection forms the basis for the ongoing theosis and perfection of those who believe in God's sending of Jesus to provide the perfect atoning death for human sin. The three writings are Hebrews, 1 John, and 1 Peter. These three writings are important to address because each of them makes explicit references to the sinlessness of Jesus and to the importance of his perfection for providing the believer direct access to forgiveness of sin and subsequently to the heavenly realm in the life to come (Heb. 2:10; 4:15; 5:9; 1 John 3:5–7; 1 Pet. 1:19; 2:22; 3:18). Although there is no direct relationship between these three writings, they do share a similar thought world of Jewish-Christians emerging out of late first-century Judaism. Each of them also has developed what might be called a rather high Christology that clearly locates Jesus as a divine figure enthroned with God.

### HEBREWS AND THE SINLESS HIGH PRIEST

Hebrews presents Jesus as entirely human and yet fully divine. The only respect in which Jesus does not share the full human experience is his sinlessness, which leverages his fully divine identity and his ability to atone for human sin. In the end, for Hebrews, Jesus is more divine than human because while he suffers temptation, he does not suffer from his own personal sin. Or perhaps another way to put it is that Jesus is the ideal human, human as God intended – faithful, obedient, and sinless. In this regard he is unlike every other human being ever to exist. The classic text for this combination of ideas comes from Hebrews 4:15: “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every

respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin [*chōris hamartia*].” This statement makes two claims. First, Jesus fully sympathizes and identifies with human weakness. He has both the capacity and the desire to do so as a high priest who addresses God on behalf of a sinful humanity. But, second, Jesus is not guilty of any personal sin, and as a result he fully identifies with divine perfection. As a high priest he can address sinful humanity on behalf of God and offer forgiveness and atonement. Jesus is, as it were, a high priest facing two directions at once with two personas – as a human who has endured temptation and suffering facing God on behalf of a sinful people and as the perfectly sinless divine agent of God facing sinful humanity with mercy and forgiveness. In this way Jesus functions truly as a priest who mediates humanity to God, and God to humanity.

Both the human and divine aspects of Jesus in relation to sin find development in Hebrews. We will treat each in turn. First, then, Hebrews presents the human Jesus who has learned obedience through suffering (5:8), has been made perfect through suffering (2:10), has been tempted in every way (4:15), and has made atonement for the sins of the people as the merciful and faithful high priest (2:17). The coordination of these passages makes clear that Hebrews views the suffering of Jesus as of paramount importance. His suffering was the means of his learning obedience (*hypakoē*, 5:8), of being made perfect (*dia pathēmation teleiōsai*, 2:10), of experiencing every temptation (*pepeirasmenon de kata panta*, 4:15), and of atoning for human sin (*eis to hilaskesthai tas hamartias tou laou*, 2:17). All of this suggests that Jesus did not come into the world as a full-blown perfect deity. Rather, Jesus had the potential to resist temptation and presumably also the potential to give in to temptation – though this latter notion has been hotly contested.<sup>1</sup> Jesus had the potential to learn from his suffering and presumably also the potential to be defeated by his suffering. In other words, Jesus did not come into the world fully formed and proven as a human being who would necessarily be obedient to God in all things. Rather, through his experiences he learned

<sup>1</sup> In his work *De Principiis* (“On First Principles”) Origen argued that Jesus could not have sinned because he was one with the Father: “[W]e must believe that there existed in Christ a human and rational soul, without supposing that it had any feeling or possibility of sin” (II.6.5). Similarly, Augustine argued that it was not possible for Jesus to commit sin: “Christ, in whom there could not possibly be any sin, not only in respect of His divinity, but also of His soul and His flesh” (*De peccatorum meritis et remissione et de baptismo parvulorum*; “On the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins and on Infant Baptism,” II.16). Wolfgang Pannenberg aptly observes that “with Augustine, the emphasis of the concept of Jesus’ sinlessness was conclusively shifted in the West from the actual overcoming of sin in the flesh to the concept of a condition of sinlessness and lack of sinfulness that existed from birth” (*Jesus – God and Man*, 2nd ed. [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977], 357).

both what it means to be a human being subject to temptation and sin and what it means to be a human being in full obedience to God by not giving in to temptation and sin, even in the face of great suffering. The connection between suffering and learning is paramount. As Craig Koester points out, the author of Hebrews picks up on a play between the Greek words “suffer” and “learn,” *pathein* and *mathein*, respectively.<sup>2</sup> In the face of suffering Jesus was not disobedient. Rather, through his practice of obedience in the face of temptation and suffering Jesus proved himself both worthy and capable of becoming the “pioneer of salvation” (*ton archēgon tēs sōtērias*; 2:10) for sinful humanity. In Hebrews, Jesus fully identifies with humanity and its struggles. He is not above the fray of human sinfulness, but he shows the obedient path through it to perfection and completeness.

At this point it is appropriate to raise a significant issue that has troubled Christian theology virtually from the outset. To put it simply: can Jesus truly be fully human if he does not himself experience the shame and guilt of moral failure, namely, of personal sin? At least this side of Eden, this side of disobedience to God, can Jesus fully embrace the human condition without at the same time knowing first-hand the experience of sin, repentance, and forgiveness? For the author of Hebrews and for most early Christians the answer was clearly “yes,” for Jesus can only provide the perfect path to God if he himself suffers sin at the hands of others, but not because of any moral failing of his own. From this perspective the very thought of a Jesus guilty of sin would by definition disqualify him from being able to make a perfect sacrifice of himself before God, for then he would in essence be no different from the high priests who had gone before, who had to offer sacrifice for their own sinfulness as well as for that of the people. According to Hebrews, the only reason that Jesus can offer himself as the perfect sacrifice once for all is precisely because he lived a sinless life. This is not to say, of course, in the view of Hebrews that Jesus did not develop as a person and grow into full and perfect obedience before God. But this learning process, this development, did not involve personal guilt for sin.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> C. Koester, *Hebrews* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 290. In his comment on Heb. 5:8 Koester refers, e.g., to a phrase from Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* 177, “learning comes by suffering,” *pathei mathos*. In the case of Jesus, his obedience was “perfect” or “complete” (*teleiōtheis*; 5:9). See also L. Johnson, *Hebrews: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006), who notes that it was “a commonplace among ancient moralists that virtue was proven or demonstrated by means of testing” (p. 140). See also Johnson, 51–53, on Hebrews’ approach to the perfection of Jesus.

<sup>3</sup> R. Williamson has put the matter clearly: “The author of Hebrews, both in the first part of 4:15 and elsewhere, states emphatically that Jesus’ humanity was total and authentic. Yet what seems to be implied by the phrase *chōris hamartias* [without sin] contradicts this emphasis

Second, Hebrews presents Jesus as a fully divine figure, a divine son through whom God created the world (1:2; 5:5), who reflects the very imprint of God's being (1:3), who is sinless and perfect (4:15; 5:9; 7:27), blameless and exalted above the heavens (7:26; 8:1), and the ultimate high priest who made a sacrifice of himself once for all in the true heavenly temple (9:11–12, 24–26), after which he sat down enthroned at the right hand of God (1:3; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2). The only reason Jesus can function in this divine capacity, ironically, is because of his *human* sinlessness, his *human* perfection – truly a reflection of divine perfection.<sup>4</sup> The only reason Jesus can act as a divine high priest is that he does not need to atone for his own sins, unlike every other human high priest. Thus, even though Hebrews seems to be open to the possibility that Jesus *could* have sinned because he was tempted in every way that humans are tempted, what truly matters is that in fact Jesus did *not* sin, and so as a perfect human he can fully mediate divine salvation to a sinful humanity. He does this as both the perfect high priest and as the perfect sacrifice, so that not only is his blood efficacious in an earthly temple for a limited period of time; rather, his blood is effective in the heavenly eternal temple once for all (7:26–28; 9:11–14).<sup>5</sup>

Having accomplished the ultimate perfect sacrifice, Jesus can now lead those who believe and trust in him to an eternal place of glory in the heavenly kingdom of God, for Jesus serves as not only priest and sacrifice but, as we have seen, the pioneer of salvation (2:10). This motif of participating in the perfect salvation of the divine Christ flows from God's participation in the sinful plight of humanity in the person of the human Jesus. This mutual participation is initiated by God but depends on the perfectly faithful obedience of Jesus as he shows the path to forgiveness and salvation.

on the unimpaired genuineness of the humanity.” He goes on to make the suggestion that “[i]f Jesus had to learn obedience, must he not have had to learn to overcome his own personal estrangement from God?” See “Hebrews 4:15 and the Sinlessness of Jesus,” *The Expository Times* 86 (1974–1975): 4–8 (4–5). W. Pannenberg posed the issue in a related manner: “The conception that at the incarnation God did not assume human nature in its corrupt sinful state but only joined himself with a humanity absolutely purified from all sin contradicts not only the anthropological radicality of sin, but also the testimony of the New Testament and of early Christian theology that the Son of God assumed sinful flesh and in sinful flesh overcame sin.” *Jesus – God and Man*, 355.

<sup>4</sup> On the notion of “perfection” or “completion,” both of which serve as translations of the Greek word group including *teleioun* (2:10; 5:9; 7:19, 28; 9:9; 10:1, 14; 11:40; 12:23), *teleiōtēs* (6:1), *teleiōsis* (7:11), *teleiōtēs* (12:2), and *teleios* (5:14; 9:11), see Koester, *Hebrews*, 122–125, and H. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 83–87.

<sup>5</sup> See D.M. Moffitt, *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 215–230. Moffitt argues that the death of Jesus per se does not accomplish atonement but that only the offering of his blood in the heavenly sanctuary by the human Jesus, now resurrected in bodily form, brings about atonement and forgiveness of human sin.

Hebrews is replete with such participatory language. A good example of this mutuality can be seen in Hebrews 2:9–11:

But we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters.

Because Jesus tastes “death for everyone” he can in turn bring “many children to glory.” Hebrews emphasizes the unity of Jesus and his followers, the sanctifier and those sanctified, who together share one Father. This unity can also be seen in the familial language of Jesus calling his followers “brothers and sisters.” The perfect obedience and faithfulness of Jesus becomes the model for the perfecting of his followers. This same Jesus shares the flesh and blood of the children of God (2:14). Because Jesus came to be like all humans, all humans can become like Jesus the Son of God; they can be adopted as children of God (2:14). As the fourth-century church father Athanasius expressed it (*De Incarnatione*, 54:3) in a sentiment that echoes the view of Hebrews: “God became human, so that we might become divine” (*autos gar enēnthrōpēsen, hina hēmeis theopoiēthōmen*).<sup>6</sup> And so Hebrews can continue by emphasizing the shared humanity of Jesus with all people (2:17–18): “Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement (*eis to hilaskesthai*) for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.” To put it in a word, the task of Jesus was completely humanitarian, identifying with humanity in temptation and suffering and showing the way out of sin into salvation. For Hebrews, Jesus *had to* do this (*ōpheilen*); because he came from God and so identified with humanity, he could do no other.

This close identification between Jesus and his followers is emphasized over and over again in the development of Hebrews (3:6, 14; 4:1; 6:19–20; 9:13–14, 24; 10:10, 14, 19–22; 12:1–2). The litany of identification between Jesus and his followers stands out clearly in these passages.<sup>7</sup> The people are God’s

<sup>6</sup> The translation from the Greek is mine. See p. 263, n.6, below.

<sup>7</sup> See A. Wikgren, “Patterns of Perfection in the Epistle to the Hebrews,” *NTS* 6:2 (1960): 159–167 (164).

house in Christ. They are partners with Christ and as such they enter his rest. Jesus is the forerunner of his followers, pointing the way. The blood of Christ purifies the consciences of the believers. Christ appears in the heavenly sanctuary on behalf of the faithful. Sanctification and perfection belong to the followers of Jesus because he and they participate in and with each other as God's children, as brothers and sisters. Jesus is the pioneer and perfecter of their faith. In all of these ways Hebrews emphasizes the mutuality between Jesus and his followers. He has become like them so that they might become like him, sinless and perfect.<sup>8</sup> In this they can and should hope, even though at present they are enduring persecution and suffering, just as Jesus had before them.<sup>9</sup> If they follow in the path of Jesus and endure their suffering in faith, hope, and obedience, then they too will be made complete and perfect and will attain the heavenly realm where Jesus rules in glory.

From the perspective of the Epistle to the Hebrews Jesus is the locus of the perfect storm – the convergence of temptation, sin, mercy, faithfulness, the high priest, and the sacrifice of atonement all rolled up in one person, one divine person who bears the sins of humanity. Jesus is both the high priest who makes the offering to God, and he himself is that very offering itself. He offers himself as atoning sacrifice. And the only reason he can do so is because he himself is without sin, without spot or blemish. Hebrews uses the ritual imagery of the proper animal sacrifice, an unblemished offering, and he transforms this *ritual* imagery of purity into the *moral* equivalent of perfect existence – that is, sinlessness. Only because he is sinless can Jesus act as a sacrifice of atonement for sin.

And the sacrifice Jesus makes takes place on both the earthly and heavenly planes. He dies as a human being in real time and space, real flesh and blood. But because he comes from the heavenly realm and does not deserve to die, because he is sinless, he functions as a sacrifice in the heavenly realm as well – a sacrifice in the true form of the Temple, the heavenly Temple, not made with human hands, not a shadowy copy of the true Temple (Heb. 9). The author of Hebrews has sought to find a way to preserve the fullness of

<sup>8</sup> On theosis in early Christian tradition, see N. Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> There is a broad consensus that Hebrews is addressing a situation of Jewish Christians experiencing some form of suffering for their faith, and who are tempted to return to a non-Christian form of Judaism (Heb. 6). See, e.g., B. Lindars, *The Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 4; Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 9–13; and F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), xxiii–xxx.

Jesus' dual humanity and divinity, but at the end of the day Hebrews joins the dominant Christian tradition of sacrificing the humanity of Jesus on the altar of his divinity, made possible by theologizing about Jesus as the perfect sinless sacrifice who atones for human sin.

### 1 PETER AND PERFECT SUFFERING

In moving to 1 Peter we see various parallels to the imagery found in Hebrews of Jesus as an unblemished lamb. As Hebrews 9:14 refers to the cleansing blood of the unblemished Christ that purifies the believer, so 1 Peter 1:18–19 can refer to the “precious blood of Christ” that redeems (*lutroō*) the believer, like the sacrifice of an unblemished lamb (*ōs amnou amōmou*).<sup>10</sup> Most important, however, is how 1 Peter draws extensively on the fourth servant song of Isaiah 52–53. As John Elliott, among others, has shown, 1 Peter makes the most extensive use of Isaiah 52:13–53:12 of any writing in the New Testament.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the author of 1 Peter appears to have found a concentration of themes and motifs in Isaiah 52–53 that helps to animate his understanding of the significance of Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection for the believer.<sup>12</sup>

Of particular significance is the cluster of motifs developed in 1 Peter 2:21–25. As 1 Peter 2:21 refers to how “Christ also suffered for you,” so Isaiah 53:3–4 refers to the servant as a “man of suffering” who has “borne our sins [LXX, *hamartias*]” and was “wounded for our sins [LXX, *hamartias*]” (53:5). As 1 Peter 2:22 states that “he committed no sin,” so Isaiah 53:9 states that “he did no wrong.” Whereas 1 Peter here uses the term *hamartias* (sins), the Septuagint version of Isaiah uses the term *anomia*, which literally means “lawlessness,” but has the general sense of wrong doing. Perhaps 1 Peter has picked up on the Septuagint's multiple usage of “sins” (*hamartias*) from Isaiah 53:3 and 5 and read this term into 53:9's *anomia*. In any case the terms “sin” and “wrongdoing” are parallel. As 1 Peter 2:23 emphasizes that Jesus suffered abuse without abusing in return, instead trusting in God's

<sup>10</sup> The LXX (Septuagint) refers to an “unblemished lamb” (*amnos amōmos*) several times; e.g., Exod. 29:38; Lev. 23:8; Ezek. 46:4. The term “unblemished” occurs frequently in the LXX (76x), almost always in reference to a sacrificial animal, be it a bull, ram, goat, sheep, or lamb.

<sup>11</sup> J. H. Elliott, *1 Peter* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 40–55.

<sup>12</sup> On Isa. 53 in early Christianity, see W. Bellinger, Jr., and W. Farmer, eds., *Jesus and the Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 and Christian Origins* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998), and A. Laato, *Who Is the Servant of the Lord? Jewish and Christian Interpretations on Isaiah 53 from Antiquity to the Middle Ages* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013).



righteous judgment, so Isaiah 53:7 and 9 stress that the suffering servant did not respond with wrongdoing against those who abused him. And perhaps most significantly, 1 Peter 2:24 states, “He himself bore our sins [*tas hamartias hēmōn autos anēngken*] in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.” Similarly, Isaiah 53:12 states that “he poured out himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors” (LXX, *en tois anomois elogisthē*) and that “he bore the sin of many” (LXX, *autos hamartias pollōn anēnegken*). The end of 1 Peter 2:24, “by his wounds [*tō mōlōpi*] you have been healed,” is a quotation from Isaiah 53:5, “by his bruises [*tō mōlōpi*] we are healed.”

As we can see, then, 1 Peter draws heavily on Isaiah 53 as a scriptural resource for reflecting on Jesus as the sinless suffering servant who dies to bear the sins of the faithful. Later Christians will do the same, from 1 Clement and Melito of Sardis in the second century to African American spirituals in the nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup>

### 1 JOHN AND ATONING SACRIFICE

In turning to 1 John we are reminded of the thought-world encountered in the Gospel of John. Just as in John’s Gospel Jesus was preexistent with God (1:1), so in 1 John we find an equally lofty Christology (John 1:1–5). But this is a Christology preoccupied with sin (primarily the term *hamartia*), indicated in part by twenty-five references to sin in only five chapters.<sup>14</sup> Just as we saw how the Gospel of John invokes the atoning blood of the Yom Kippur ceremony to provide meaning to the Passover sacrifice of Jesus (John 1:29), so 1 John emphasizes that “the blood of Jesus his [God’s] Son cleanses us from all sin” (1:7). As the high priest confesses the sins of the people on the scapegoat during the observance of Yom Kippur, so in 1 John “if we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1:9). In the Fourth Gospel John the Baptist declared that Jesus is “the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (1:29, *ho airōn tēn hamartian tou kosmou*). Just so does 1 John affirm that Jesus “is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2, *hilasmos estin peri tōn hamartiōn hēmōn*; see also 1 John 4:10). Jesus was “revealed to take away sins” (1 John 3:5, *hina tas hamartias arti*), and he can do so only because “in him there is no sin” (1 John 3:5).

<sup>13</sup> See J. Sawyer, *The Fifth Gospel: Isaiah in the History of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 83–99.

<sup>14</sup> 1 John 1:7, 8, 9, 10; 2:1, 2; 12; 3:4, 5, 6, 8, 9; 4:10; 5:16, 17, 18.

In a way comparable to what we saw in Hebrews, 1 John also presents Jesus as both the unblemished atoning sacrifice and the sinless high priest who offers the sacrifice, namely, himself. The blood of Jesus cleanses the believer from all sin (1:7). This understanding of Jesus' death as an atoning sacrifice calls the Jewish ritual for the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) directly into view. The Septuagint version of Leviticus 25:9 translates the Hebrew *yôm hakkippurîm* (Yom Kippur) as *hē hēmera tou hilasmou*, "the day of atonement."<sup>15</sup> Thus, when 1 John twice refers to Jesus as the "atoning sacrifice" (2:2 and 4:10), the author seems to have the Yom Kippur ritual in mind. As expressed in 2:2, "he is the atoning sacrifice [*hilasmos*] for our sins." And again in 4:10, "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice [*hilasmos*] for our sins." Jesus serves as the atoning sacrifice because in his death his blood cleanses the sins of all (1:7).

The notion of human blood atoning for sin can already be found in 4 Maccabees 6:28–29, where the martyr Eleazar prays that God will "make my blood serve as a cleansing for them," namely, the faithful Jews who have not compromised their faith in the events leading up to the Maccabean revolt. Further, in a summary statement praising Eleazar and the other Maccabean martyrs, 4 Maccabees 17:22 states: "And through the blood of those devout ones and their death as an atoning sacrifice (*hilastērion*), divine Providence preserved Israel that previously had been mistreated."<sup>16</sup> Here the blood of the Maccabean martyrs functioned as an atoning sacrifice that contributed to the salvation of Israel from the ruthless hands of the king, Antiochus Epiphanes IV, who sought to destroy the Jewish faith. Still, while 4 Maccabees presents a clear understanding that human blood can atone for sin and can invoke God's saving action, at the same time the early Christian understanding of Jesus' atoning blood and death takes on even more significance in light of belief in his resurrection. Jesus' atoning blood provides salvation not only for the Jewish people but for the whole world (2:2). While the blood of the martyrs in 4 Maccabees has atoning significance in a more restricted sense in terms of both for whom and when their sacrifice was effective, the blood of Jesus has atoning significance in an unrestricted sense, both temporally (for all time) and spatially (for all people). Whether or not

<sup>15</sup> See the discussion in R. Brown, *The Epistles of John* (New York: Doubleday, 1982), 217–222.

<sup>16</sup> 4 Maccabees can most likely be dated to sometime in the first century CE, though some push the date earlier and others later. See the discussion in David deSilva, *4 Maccabees* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 14–18, and J.W. van Henten, *The Maccabean Martyrs as Saviours of the Jewish People: A Study of 2 and 4 Maccabees* (Leiden: Brill, 1997).

1 John was familiar with 4 Maccabees or even the story of Eleazar's atoning death, the atoning sacrifice of Jesus operates on a cosmic level.

Believers can participate in the sinlessness of Jesus by confessing their sins and claiming their forgiveness in Christ's atoning death and resurrection (1 John 2:12; 3:5). Indeed, 1 John goes so far as to say that those who have been truly redeemed in Christ *cannot* sin, because God's seed abides in them.<sup>17</sup> They no longer have the capacity to sin if they have truly been born anew from God (1 John 3:9).<sup>18</sup> The context in which the author of 1 John makes this claim has to do with a sharp contrast that is drawn between the true believers of this Johannine community and the false believers who have seceded from this fellowship of Christians and have formed a rival Christian sect. From the perspective of the author of 1 John, these secessionists are from the devil. As the author states in 1 John 3:8, "Everyone who commits sin is a child of the devil; for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil." The works of the devil include false beliefs about Jesus and the Father who sent him. We find parallels to this language in the Gospel of John 8 and 9, where Jesus tells the unbelieving Jewish leaders that they are "from their father the devil" (8:44). Similarly in 1 John the author calls his opponents "children of the devil" (3:10).<sup>19</sup>

Thus 1 John continues the Gospel of John's blend of incarnational theology with a very high Christology. Through Jesus God has provided a remedy for human sin, and in Jesus God has revealed a perfect and sinless son. 1 John and the Gospel of John are in complete accord regarding the sinless humanity of Jesus.

<sup>17</sup> R. Brown notes, "The Greek church fathers thought of the seed of God as an interior force by which the soul, no longer oriented toward sin, allows itself to be led by a dynamism that makes it incapable of choosing evil" (*The Epistles of John*, 430).

<sup>18</sup> See *ibid.*, 410–416.

<sup>19</sup> On the identity of the secessionists and the conflict with John's community, see *ibid.*, 71–85, 428–432.

## Saving Jesus from Perfection

**T**HROUGHOUT THIS BOOK WE HAVE BEEN EXPLORING THE QUESTION of how Jesus came to be viewed as sinless in early Christianity. Some of the traditions we have traced show that Jesus was considered sinful in various ways by his contemporaries, especially in view of the shameful manner in which he died. Not only in death, but also in his public ministry was Jesus accused of violating understandings of righteousness, so that he was seen as a scandalous figure in his treatment of his family, in his choice of friends, and in his rival interpretation of Jewish faith and practice. His own ministry was initiated after he received a baptism of repentance from John the Baptist. Finally, the birth of Jesus, whatever we can truly know of it, reflects traditions that would have a righteous Joseph divorcing the apparently unfaithful Mary. In all of these ways, from birth to death Jesus could be cast in a sinful light, leading the people astray, and violating the Sabbath, the Temple, and the very law that God had given to Moses and the people of Israel to observe.

But, as we have also seen, the tragic death of Jesus was transformed into the saving death of Jesus in light of resurrection faith. In view of the resurrection the collision of Jesus' death with the Passover festival organically gave rise to associations between Jesus and the sacrificial paschal lamb, an unblemished lamb, a spotless lamb. And not only this sacrifice, but also the two goats of Yom Kippur – the scapegoat that bore away the sins of the people and the sacrificial goat by whose blood the Temple altar and sanctuary were cleansed of sin.<sup>1</sup> If God had indeed raised Jesus from the dead, then Jesus was not only the messiah, but also God's own sacrifice of atonement on behalf of all human sinfulness (Rom. 3:21–26), God's perfect sacrifice of his

<sup>1</sup> See J.S. Siker, "Yom Kippuring Passover: Recombinant Ritualizing in Early Christianity," in C. Eberhardt, ed., *Ritual and Metaphor: Sacrifice in the Bible* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 2011).

perfect son, the perfect high priest, like us in every respect – except without sin, as the letter to the Hebrews would later state (4:15). Jesus alone, the unblemished, was the holy one of God. Had Jesus violated the traditions of the oral law? Yes, but from the perspective of the earliest Christians he showed the true interpretation of the written law, over against the narrowness of Pharisaic interpretation, against formative rabbinic tradition, and over against the teachings and traditions associated with the Temple cult, with Jesus echoing the ancient prophetic critique of the sacrificial cult we know from Amos (e.g., 5:21–22) and Jeremiah (e.g., 7, 26; see also Stephen’s speech from Acts 7). He called for justice and mercy rather than straining out a gnat while swallowing a camel (Matt. 23:24). Or such are the memories of Christian origins.

Jesus was not the militant messiah that some had hoped for, certainly disappointing the hopes of his followers as expressed in Luke 24:21. But that amounted to nothing in light of Christian belief in the resurrection of God’s crucified messiah. As the Apostle Paul put it rather early on in the tradition, Jesus was God’s own sacrifice of atonement for human sin (Rom. 3:21–26), the obedient son of God whose own faithfulness to God brought about salvation, the new Adam through whom all creation had been made new (Rom. 5), the one whose death and resurrection released the living Spirit of God on all who believed, Jew and Gentile alike (Rom. 8; Acts 2, 10). In retrospect it all made sense. Or at least in retrospect this is how the earliest Christians made sense of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection – in view of their experiences, their scriptures, and their ritual practices.

In this final chapter I will pursue the question of the theological significance of a sinless Jesus for contemporary Christian faith and practice. I will proceed by first looking at a pivotal text from Paul, 2 Corinthians 5:16–21, which opens the door to the contrast between knowing Jesus in human terms and the transformation of that knowing in relation to faith in the resurrected Jesus. This will lead us to some reflection on the portrayal of Jesus as both human and divine. Christian tradition has ever sacrificed the humanity of Jesus on the altar of his divinity, with the result that a sinless Jesus is simply presumed as a requisite of his divine status. This discussion will necessarily raise the question of what it means to be fully human in relation to sin. I will then explore the kind of theological box into which this traditional Christology has put both Jesus and God across Christian tradition, with attention to contemporary challenges to classic Christology. Finally, I will consider the motifs of metaphor and *theosis* (divinization) in relation to the idea of a sinless Jesus. I will argue that sinlessness is best understood as a metaphor, but it is a metaphor that has been fossilized and

ontologized by Christian tradition in such a way that it actually undermines the very reality to which it points. Finally, I will conclude by suggesting that applying the Eastern Christian understanding of *theosis* to Jesus might be a way forward.

#### RETROSPECTION AND KNOWING JESUS, KNOWING CHRIST

In perhaps what is the most dramatic statement that demonstrates what I have been calling retrospective theologizing, the Apostle Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:16–21:

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

“Even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way” (*ei kai egnōkamen kata sarka Christon, alla nun ouketi ginōskomen*). Here Paul draws a contrast between how we once knew Christ according to the flesh (i.e., in human terms) and how believers now know him in view of his death and resurrection (i.e., not in human terms but in divine perspective). This passage has generated much discussion over the years.<sup>2</sup> There is a general consensus that Paul means something like the

<sup>2</sup> See especially J.L. Martyn, “Epistemology at the Turn of the Ages: 2 Corinthians 5:16,” in *Christian History and Interpretation: Studies Presented to John Knox*, ed. W.R. Farmer et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 269–287, and J.P. Lewis, ed., *Interpreting 2 Corinthians 5:14–21: An Exercise in Hermeneutics* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen Press, 1989), a collection of essays on various approaches to 2 Cor. 5:14–21. See also H. Boers, “2 Corinthians 5:14–6:2: A Fragment of Pauline Christology,” *CBQ* 64 (2002): 527–547; W. Hulitt Gloer, “2 Corinthians 5:14–21,” *Review and Expositor* 86 (1989): 397–405; along with the standard commentaries, e.g., by V.P. Furnish, *II Corinthians* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984); R.P. Martin, *2 Corinthians* (Waco, TX: Word, 1986); M. E. Thrall, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1: *II Corinthians I–VII* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994); F. Matera, *II Corinthians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003); T. Schmeller, *Der zweite Brief an die Korinther*, vol 1: *2 Kor 1,1–7,4* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 2010); and R. Collins, *Second Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013).

following: that whereas we once understood and evaluated Jesus/Christ<sup>3</sup> according to worldly standards, in earthly terms, now in light of his death and resurrection believers see him from God's perspective, revealed as the one who has brought about salvation and a new creation. Thus, not only does Paul see himself and others in a completely new situation; rather, this very understanding comes from having adopted a radically new vision of Jesus' identity as the crucified and now risen messiah. For Paul, a dramatic and cosmic sea-change has occurred in the Christ event, specifically in Jesus' death and resurrection. "Everything has become new!"

There is a striking correlation in this passage from 2 Corinthians 5 between knowing Christ *kata sarka* (5:16), according to worldly standards, and Paul's assertion about Christ knowing/being sin (5:21). From Paul's pre-Christian perspective on Jesus and his followers, Jesus was perceived as precisely *not* being the Christ during his public ministry, proven by his violation of Jewish law and culminating with his shameful and sinful death by crucifixion. Many of Paul's contemporaries thus viewed Jesus as a failed or misguided messiah, even a sinful messiah who had led the people astray (ironically the very thing that Jesus warns about in Matt. 24:4, 11, 24). This is why as a faithful Pharisee Paul persecuted the early Christians. But Paul came to know Jesus *kata pneuma*, according to the spirit, in light of his death and resurrection. What this showed for Paul was that Christ in fact knew no sin (*mē gnonta hamartian*), which is why he could take on the burden of human sinfulness as an atoning sacrifice (*hilasterion*; Rom. 3:21–26) by thus "becoming sin" on our behalf (*hyper hēmōn hamartian epoiēsen*; 2 Cor. 5:21). The pre-Christian Paul had claimed for himself freedom from sin under the law as a sign of his righteousness. He had thought, as regarding righteousness under the law, that he was "blameless" (*amemptos*), without mark or blemish (Phil. 3:6). And from this-worldly vantage as a Pharisaic Jew, as Paul describes it in retrospect, he could make a judgment about Jesus and his followers – that they were transgressors of God's law. But now from his new vantage "in Christ" he came to believe the reverse – that in fact Paul was the one needing to have his blemishes, his sins, removed by the sinless Christ. As Paul puts it in Philippians 3: 7–9:

<sup>3</sup> The modern historian's convention of referring to the historical or earthly Jesus, on the one hand, and the Christ of faith, on the other hand, is completely foreign to Paul. For Paul there is no distinction between Jesus and the Christ; from his current vantage he cannot see Jesus without seeing the crucified and risen Christ. Still, just as Paul can recall his life before coming to faith in Christ (as a persecutor of the church, Gal. 1:11–15), so can he recall his perception of Jesus and the Jesus/Christian movement before he came to faith in Christ. That perception, however, was *kata sarka*, according to worldly standards, and hence a false perception that he now readily admits.

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ (*dia pisteōs Christou*), the righteousness from God based on faith.

This complete inversion of values, this exchange of sin and righteousness between Jesus as the Christ and human believers like Paul, reflects the completely new understanding, the new creation, that Paul came to believe God had brought about through the death and resurrection of Christ. Knowing Jesus as Christ and Lord replaced knowing Jesus *kata sarka*, according to worldly standards. Indeed, Paul can remember that he *used* to view Jesus in this way, but there is no way after his experience of the risen Christ and the indwelling of Christ's Spirit that he can *continue* to view Jesus in fundamentally human terms. For Paul, all humanity has sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:9), but in this respect Christ alone has in fact attained the glory of God through the resurrection (Rom. 1:4), and therefore he is counted among "all humanity" not in terms of sin, but only in terms of death or, as Paul puts it, "even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:8). Paul is concerned with the macro-level of Jesus' life and its culmination in death and resurrection. Paul is not concerned with particular Sabbath controversies that Jesus had or with the finer points of legal debate over oral tradition that Jesus had with the Pharisees during his ministry. Instead, Paul reasons from Jesus' resurrection from the dead to sacrificial and obedient death to a death for sins to a Jesus who embodied perfect and faithful righteousness. All of this is what Paul means by *no longer* knowing Christ *kata sarka*.

But we should linger on what Paul refers to as *previously* knowing Christ *kata sarka*, literally "according to the flesh," meaning something more like "in a worldly way," or "according to human standards." This knowledge of Jesus *kata sarka* gives us a window onto the pre-Christian Paul's and other non-Christian Jewish understandings of Jesus and his ministry in light of the standards and values of Jewish faith and practice of the day. And what were these standards? In sum, this perspective saw Jesus in very human terms, not as the sinless one raised to new life from a disgraceful death but as a transgressor who was justly crucified for his violation of God's law, for leading the people astray, for claiming to know the will of God better than the religious authorities of the day. This false messiah was a presumptuous upstart, a misguided Jesus whose life was nothing but a trajectory of



transgression from birth to baptism to ministry to death. This is the Jesus who was known “from a worldly point of view.”

As Raymond Collins has put it, this passage shows a Paul who once “viewed Christ in a merely human fashion, specifically, perhaps, as a violator of the law and a deluded preacher whose disciples departed from what Paul believed to be the canons of Jewish orthodoxy.”<sup>4</sup> Or as Margaret Thrall has noted: “Paul refers to and repudiates his own pre-conversion estimate of Jesus. Since a crucified messiah was a scandal, to have met such an end Jesus must have been a trouble-maker, accursed by God [Deut. 21.23; Gal. 3.13], and justly condemned as an heretical teacher.”<sup>5</sup> But Paul no longer views Jesus in this way. In light of his experience of the risen Jesus we see Paul reasoning in retrospect, from the triumphant resurrection to the atoning death to the faithful ministry of Jesus.

#### BETWEEN HUMANITY AND DIVINITY

This is not a new story. It is the same salvific story that has been passed on for two millennia. It is the same story that led early Christians to debate at great length the identity of this Jesus, his humanity, his divinity, his incarnation, his resurrection. It is the same discussion and debate that has taken place from the origins of Christian faith to the present day, and no doubt into the future. The discussion of Jesus’ identity in relation to God and humanity typically finds resolution in recognizable fashion as well, in the classic Christian confession of Jesus who is both fully human and fully divine (e.g., in the Apostles’ Creed or in the Nicene Creed). Sometimes the tradition emphasizes his humanity (a “low Christology”), but mostly the emphasis falls on his divinity (a “high Christology”). The only real issue is whether one starts with his humanity and then ends with some form of divine identity along the lines of the Gospel of Mark or whether one starts with his divine preexistence that finds expression in human form through the incarnation and then has him return to his heavenly home, where he truly belongs, by means of resurrection, along the lines of the Gospel of John or Hebrews.

The fundamental question revolves around where and how one locates Jesus on this sliding scale between humanity and divinity. If Jesus had come from God, and was truly God in the flesh, then in what way was he human? If Jesus was truly fully human, but God had raised him from the dead, then

<sup>4</sup> *Second Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 119–120.

<sup>5</sup> *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1: *II Corinthians I–VII* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 416–417.

in what way was he divine? Christian tradition, of course, eventually settled on the paradox of Jesus being both fully divine and fully human at the same time. Only in this way, went the reasoning, could the tradition preserve the soteriological force of fully representing and reconciling both the divine and the human, all animated by God's gracious Spirit in the mystery of God's wisdom. Only in this way could the Christian tradition envision both humanizing divinity and divinizing humanity. Or as the fourth century bishop Athanasius of Alexandria put it in his reflections on the incarnation: "God became human, so that we might be made divine."<sup>6</sup>

And yet. When push comes to shove, and it inevitably does, it appears that Christian tradition has ever sacrificed the full humanity of Jesus on the altar of his full divinity. The sacrificial humanity of Jesus only purchases that which any human life can accomplish at its very best – a profound and transformative prophetic inspiration along the lines of a Gandhi, a Martin Luther King, Jr., or an Oscar Romero, to take twentieth-century examples. But Christian tradition has typically not interpreted Jesus' human sacrificial death, this human prophetic death, as sufficient for divine salvation of other humans from the powers of sin and death. Only the sacrificial divinity of Jesus has been understood to bring about that which is beyond all human actions – the saving act of God on behalf of all humanity.

Such is certainly the point of Hebrews in presenting Jesus as the great High Priest who offers himself up as the perfect heavenly sacrifice in the ideal heavenly Temple, not a Temple of this world made with mere human hands (Heb. 9:24; 10:19). The humanly sinful sacrificial death of Jesus (Rom. 8:3) becomes the divine atoning death of Jesus on behalf of sinful humanity, confirmed to be efficacious by the resurrection of Jesus.<sup>7</sup> The unthinkable divine sacrificial death becomes the unimaginable divine gift of human redemption, expressed in classic terms in such texts as John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." Or as Lisa Sowle Cahill has aptly put it:

[I]n the *human* being of Jesus Christ, *God* enters fully into the human condition. God's uniting love for all creatures reaches into every dark, lonely, and tormented corner of existence and brings God into every place,

<sup>6</sup> *De Incarnatione*, "On the Incarnation," 54:3. Translation by the author (*autos gar enēnthrōpēsen, hina hēmeis theopoiēthōmen*). For the original text, see F.L. Cross, ed., *Athanasius De Incarnatione: An Edition of the Greek Text* (London: SPCK, 1963), 85.

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., M.J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001).

not excluding the suffering of the wicked and the damned. In that darkness and with unfathomable self-emptying God becomes “guilty” and dies in Christ . . . In Jesus Christ, God enters all of the human condition, save sin – and human beings enter completely, if eschatologically, into God.<sup>8</sup>

The final sentence resonates well with the vision of Athanasius regarding the reciprocity of human and divine in the person of Jesus. Let me use Cahill’s eloquent articulation as a springboard to pursue further two key questions related to the larger focus of this book: (1) What does it mean that in Jesus God becomes “guilty” and dies in Christ? and (2) What does it mean that in Jesus God “enters fully” into “all of the human condition,” *save sin*?

It is telling that Cahill states that in Jesus God becomes “guilty” (in quotation marks), but not *guilty* (without the modifying quotation marks). The term “guilty,” in quotes, clearly suggests that in point of fact Jesus was not truly *guilty*. He may have been guilty under Roman law that readily crucified any would-be challengers to the supreme authority of Caesar. He may also have been guilty, according to Jewish tradition, of violating Jewish law to such an extent that in the view of the religious leaders of the day Jesus warranted death. But in either case this kind of guilt was really only “guilt,” namely, not truly guilt before God, not guilt of any real sin that warranted death or went against God’s will. Hence Jesus’ “guilt” was really innocence, as the centurion in Luke observed (23:47). In this way Christian tradition saves Jesus from any genuine guilt, any substantive wrongdoing, anything that could actually be construed as sin. And so this prepares Jesus to serve as a spotless sacrifice atoning for human sin.

The second issue, however, pushes deeper. What does it mean for Jesus to “enter fully” into the human condition, “save sin”? If we know anything about the fullness of the human condition East of Eden (Gen. 3:24), we know that it inherently involves human sinfulness. And so the question is, can Jesus truly enter into *our* full humanity, the only full humanity we know, apart from the experience of human sin? The Christian tradition goes so far as to affirm that Jesus was tempted in every way we are (Heb. 4:15), but then pulls up just before crashing into the ugly reality of human sin. Cahill’s depiction of Jesus entering fully into the human condition concludes with “save sin” almost as an obvious aside that needs no articulation or clarification, so engrained is it in the Christian tradition. But it is precisely this

<sup>8</sup> “The Atonement Paradigm: Does It Still Have Explanatory Value?,” *Theological Studies* 68 (2007): 418–432 (428–429).

“except for sin” that I want to explore in light of the preceding chapters. My question is whether the claim of a sinless Jesus actually threatens the *full* humanity of Jesus, rather than exemplifying it. Of course, this calls into question what *full* humanity truly means.

### FULLY HUMAN?

The classic Christian interpretation of Adam and Eve in the Garden is that only they were human in the fullest sense, namely, God’s perfect creatures – sinless – not that this lasted very long.<sup>9</sup> In this view only Adam and Eve *before* their disobedience represented *full* humanity, a humanity that would be restored only in the perfectly obedient Jesus. The Apostle Paul develops this notion in his presentation of Jesus as the new Adam who is obedient to God, rather than the original Adam who sinned by grasping for divinity (Rom. 5; Phil. 2:6–11). This human sin so disrupted the relationship between God and humans that God was compelled to force these first mythic humans out of the Garden of Eden, out of Paradise, and into a much harsher reality that knew shame and guilt, and with it human toil and pain during child-birth (Gen. 3:16–19). Adam and Eve were justly shamed and humiliated because they had sinned against God, as human beings have been justly shamed and found guilty of sin ever since. But Jesus, in this view, was unjustly shamed and humiliated even to the point of death (Phil. 2:6–11), which – unlike Adam and Eve – he did not deserve. And so God imputed his salvific and righteous innocence to the rest of guilty humanity. In this way, as various theories of atonement have developed it,<sup>10</sup> God did away with

<sup>9</sup> See G. Anderson, *The Genesis of Perfection: Adam and Eve in Jewish and Christian Imagination* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002). Other characters in the Bible, of course, are portrayed as righteous before God. Abraham comes especially to mind (Gen. 15:6), as does Job, about whom God brags to Satan: “Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man [*amemptos, alēthinos*], who fears God and turns away from evil” (Job 1:8).

<sup>10</sup> Books on atonement theology have been published at a rapid pace over the last generation, as various Christian traditions seek to revise and make sense of atonement in ways that respond to charges of sacralizing violence, or making God out to be a child-abuser. See, e.g., J. Goldingay, ed., *Atonement Today* (London: SPCK, 1995); J. Finlay, *Problems with Atonement: The Origins of, and Controversy about, the Atonement Doctrine* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005); J. Beilby et al., eds., *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006); M.D. Baker, ed., *Proclaiming the Scandal of the Cross: Contemporary Images of the Atonement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006); S. McNight, *A Community Called Atonement: Living Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2008); T.W. Jennings, Jr., *Transforming Atonement: A Political Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009); M.D. Baker and J. Green, *Recovering the Scandal*

human sinfulness through Jesus' sacrificial death and granted humanity the gift of forgiveness and new life through the risen Christ.

The calculus works, but, as I will ask below, does it come at too high a cost? This brings us back to the question of the meaning of "full humanity." The classic Christian view is that "full humanity" is humanity redeemed by Christ's perfect atoning death to its original state of potential sinlessness.<sup>11</sup> From this perspective the post-Eden/pre-Christian state of humanity is one not of *full* humanity but of *fallen* humanity in need of redemption. But I would like to propose a different understanding of "full humanity." The fullness of our current human condition is indeed one of imperfection, sinfulness, as guilty and full of shame as our mythic progenitors Adam and Eve just before (or just after) their expulsion from paradise. If Jesus is truly fully human *as we are*, must not he too come as one of us in all of our utter humanness? If Jesus is an *ideal* expression of humanity who knows no sin, then is he truly like the rest of us *real* humans who know sin so well? If we protect Jesus from the moral vicissitudes of life, does he really enter fully into "the human condition"? If Jesus does not truly come as *one of us*, as one of the fallible imperfect creatures that we are, then is he actually human? If Jesus does not know sin and its companions of guilt and shame, if he is unacquainted with remorse, repentance, and reconciliation, in what way does he actually identify with *our* humanity? A perfectly sinless Jesus is a retrospective projection of early Christians who sought to make sense of the notion of a crucified and risen messiah. The concept of the atoning blood of Jesus arose from a culture of the efficacy of animal sacrifice now

*of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011); and J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011). See also the vast literature generated by René Girard's work on sacred violence: René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979); *Sacrifice* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011); *The One by Whom Scandal Comes* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2014); and W. Palaver, *René Girard's Mimetic Theory* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013). Feminist critiques of atonement theory include, among others, D. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993); R.N. Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2008); and R.N. Brock and R.A. Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves* (Boston: Beacon, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> One of the early problems faced by Christians was what to do with individuals who had been redeemed from sin, but then fell back into sin again. Hebrews famously states that "it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened" (6:4–6). Later on, during times of intense persecution, there was much debate about how to handle the "lapsed," namely, those Christians who had renounced their faith to avoid punishment under Roman persecution. See especially Cyprian of Carthage's "On the Lapsed," written c. 251 CE; St. Cyprian, *The Lapsed*, ed. and trans. M. Bévenot (New York: Newman, 1957).

re-inscribed with divine blood in light of faith that God had raised this crucified messiah to new life. The ritual perfection of an animal now became the moral perfection of a divine human.

But the cost of a perfectly sinless Jesus, I propose, is a Jesus and a God who does not truly connect with the *real* fullness of the human condition, *our* human condition, *our* sinful state of affairs. If Jesus does not know the sin we know, not only as temptation, but also as failing to be perfect in every situation, then his complete identification with our full and fallen humanity is at risk, and not only at risk, but a fiction. Pure and simple – or perhaps better, not so pure, and hardly simple. If Jesus joins us in the human condition, then he joins it not only in the physical trials of illness and the frailty of the human body, but also in the moral trials of sin, guilt, remorse, repentance, forgiveness, and restoration in the eyes of a gracious God. Is this not what John's baptism of repentance was all about? And did not Jesus identify precisely with this baptismal ministry, as a penitent transformed, and not with the retrospective and awkward sanitizing of this story at the hands of the evangelists seeking to avoid the implication that Jesus needed to repent of anything? James Cone put it so well a generation ago: "By being baptized, Jesus defines his existence as one with sinners and thus conveys the meaning of the coming kingdom. The kingdom is for the poor, not the rich; and it comes as an expression of God's love, not judgment. In baptism Jesus embraces the condition of sinners, affirming their existence as his own. He is one of them!"<sup>12</sup>

Of course, the question is in what sense is Jesus "one of them," one of *us*? Cone's statement is suggestive ("as one with sinners"), but falls short of identifying Jesus as a sinner. Recently the popular Jesuit author James Martin wrote that Jesus "was a flesh-and-blood, real-life, honest-to-God man who experienced everything that human beings do."<sup>13</sup> Again, very suggestive, until a few paragraphs later: "Everything proper to the human being – except sin – Jesus experienced."<sup>14</sup> As with Lisa Cahill, so with Fr. Martin – Jesus is completely like us, except for sin. Jesus is just like us, except he is not. When it comes to the baptism of Jesus, Martin goes an inch further, but only an inch. Why was Jesus baptized? Martin suggests that "Jesus decided to enter even more deeply into the human condition. Though sinless, Jesus participates in the ritual that others are performing as well. He participates in this movement of repentance and conversion not because he needs it, but because it aligns him with those around him, with those anticipating the reign of

<sup>12</sup> *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1970), 115.

<sup>13</sup> J. Martin, S.J., *Jesus: A Pilgrimage* (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 2.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

God, with the community of believers.”<sup>15</sup> One question, of course, is what others being baptized would have thought. Surely they did not wonder why this “sinless one” was being baptized, because the whole notion of Jesus’ sinlessness did not arise until after his followers came to believe he had been raised from the dead. Nor would people have interpreted the baptism of Jesus as a sign of his sinfulness, because the very significance of John’s baptism pointed to the embrace of a radical commitment to God and a path of righteousness.

By all accounts Jesus exemplified a life patterned by right action and a vision that challenged what he saw as the moral failures of religious leaders in his own context. He was able to gather sufficient followers and to conduct an effective ministry to the consternation of rival and more traditional religious teachers in the synagogues and the Jerusalem Temple alike. That he was executed, in fact, demonstrates that his challenges were considered threatening in the extreme and best dealt with by seeing to his demise at the hands of Rome. Clearly, his opponents had no doubt that his death would be the end of the troubles he had caused. Without a leader, surely his followers would disband. Belief in the shocking news of his resurrection, however, inspired his followers to new depths of faith and commitment and led to a Christian movement that Roman authorities would come to characterize as “a most mischievous superstition, . . . hideous and shameful.”<sup>16</sup>

For those standing outside the Christian faith community the whole notion of a crucified messiah now raised from the dead was indeed, as Paul put it so clearly, nothing but foolishness and a stumbling block (1 Cor. 1:23), by all appearances and by common wisdom a mischievous superstition indeed. But the story of Jesus was anything but common wisdom, his death anything but noble, and claims to resurrection suspicious in the extreme. This is precisely Paul’s point. What is remarkable is that so many came to believe that God had, in fact, raised this crucified messiah from the dead.<sup>17</sup>

But believe they did. And in the process they had no choice but to make sense of his life and death in light of resurrection faith. As we saw above in discussing the death of Jesus, the followers of Jesus initially viewed his death

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 105–106.

<sup>16</sup> Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44 (c. 115 CE). See R. van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 39–53.

<sup>17</sup> See R. Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997).

in tragic terms – another of God’s prophets killed (Luke 24:21) – and only with shock, disbelief, and “many convincing proofs” (Acts 1:2) did they come to believe that God had raised him from the dead, for which they had no preparation. As we have also seen, it was in this process of retrospective theologizing about the significance of Jesus’ death that many early believers came to see his death in sacrificial terms as salvific. Thus began the sanitizing of Jesus as an unblemished sacrifice, a morally perfect man not guilty of sin, and hence not warranting death.

### SANITIZING JESUS

It is clear *why* Christian tradition has insisted on sanitizing the fullness of Jesus’ humanity. But is such a move *necessary* to Christian theologizing about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus? Inevitably, it seems, Christian tradition is determined to build a shield around Jesus to protect him from any taint of corruption. Thus, as we have seen, the story of Jesus’ baptism was reworked to remove any hint that he went to John for a baptism of repentance. Instead, for Matthew, he was baptized to fulfill all righteousness; for Luke, he was expressly *not* baptized by John the Baptist, because John had just been put in jail by Herod; and in John’s Gospel there simply is no baptism of Jesus at all. Instead John the Baptist bears witness that he saw the Spirit of God come upon Jesus.

Beyond cleaning up the baptism story, we have also seen how Matthew and Luke each shaped a birth story, if in very different ways, that portrayed a miraculous virgin birth of the infant Jesus. For Christian tradition, however, the miracle was extended to make it clear that Jesus’ mother, Mary, was herself the sinless and unstained vessel through whom Jesus was born into the world. This veneration of Mary as a holy person, as noted earlier, can already be found in the second-century *Protoevangelium of James*. Subsequently, the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception was eventually developed, the doctrine that Mary herself was conceived and born apart from the taint of original sin, lest during gestation she might contaminate Jesus with sin.<sup>18</sup> The doctrines of the perpetual virginity of Mary and her bodily assumption into heaven only further served to distance her from any kind of corruption

<sup>18</sup> See especially M. Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*, 2nd rev. edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 241–260. This doctrine was not formally made official doctrine until 1854, when Pope Pius IX promulgated the papal bull *Ineffabilis Deus*.



or sin, and with it from a full humanity of her own.<sup>19</sup> Thus sanitizing Jesus also radiated into the necessity of sanitizing Mary.<sup>20</sup>

The virgin birth of Jesus to a sinless Mary received additional development as Christian writers came to believe that Jesus' perfection at birth meant that Mary experienced no birth pangs when she gave birth to Jesus. And so the curse of birth pain that had been pronounced on all women after Eve (Gen. 3:16), because of sin, was now reversed. For example, regarding the birth of Jesus, Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335–395 CE) compares the curse of birth pangs that the first mother received as a result of her sin with the freedom from such pain resulting from the birth of Jesus to Mary: Whereas “the former (Eve) was condemned because of sin to pain in the labors of childbirth, in (Mary’s) case pain is banished through joy.”<sup>21</sup>

By seeking to protect Jesus from any form of contamination by human sin in his birth and life, so that he might be preserved as the perfect atoning sacrifice at his death, and hence worthy of resurrection, Christian theology makes Jesus out to be a kind of Superman who comes from another planet, the divine realm, with special powers. But in being so much *more* than human, he ends up being *less* than fully human. It is because Christian tradition views Jesus through the lens of resurrection and perfect atoning sacrifice that the rest of Jesus' life is brought into line with this claim of sinless perfection. He becomes a caricature of what we imagine a perfectly divine human might look like, a divine automaton.

The second-century gnostic Christian Valentinus famously demonstrates this kind of caricature by arguing that Jesus “ate and drank in a special way, without excreting his solids. He had such a great capacity for continence that the nourishment within him was not corrupted, for he did not experience corruption.”<sup>22</sup> According to Valentinus, then, Jesus had no bowel movements,

<sup>19</sup> Significantly, John Chrysostom, Bernard of Clairvaux, and perhaps Thomas Aquinas opposed the notion that Mary was sinless. See Chrysostom, *Homilies on St. John*; Homily 21, in *NPNF*, vol. 14, p. 74, and Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III, q. 27.

<sup>20</sup> The twelfth-century French abbot Bernard of Clairvaux was willing to grant that Mary was *born* having been cleansed of sin, but not that she was *conceived* apart from original sin. See *The Letters of St. Bernard of Clairvaux*, ed. and trans. B.S. James (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2003), letter 174.

<sup>21</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, “On the Nativity of the Savior.” Translation by B.E. Dunlop, “Earliest Greek Patristic Orations on the Nativity: A Study Including Translations,” Ph.D. Thesis, Boston College (2004), 168. So also Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, part III, q 35, art 6.

<sup>22</sup> Bentley Layton, trans., *The Gnostic Scriptures* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1987), 239. See also I. Dunderberg, “The School of Valentinus,” in A. Marjanen and P. Luomanen, eds., *A Companion to Second-Century Christian “Heretics”* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 64–99. Similarly, Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–215 CE) commented that Jesus ate “not because of bodily

as this would imply some kind of corruption or imperfection in Jesus. Valentinus was, fortunately, sharply repudiated by the emerging orthodox Christian tradition for so divinizing Jesus that his hold on humanity was tenuous at best. To be sure, Valentinus had a thoroughly docetic view of Jesus as one who was utterly divine and managed to appear human, but I wonder if the strong emphasis of Christian tradition on the divinity of Jesus ultimately provides only variations on this docetic theme by precluding any notion of Jesus as one who sinned, or even had the capacity to sin, in any real way. We have already seen this same caricature of Jesus in the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, where the divine child Jesus becomes so regularly annoyed with and offended by mere mortals that he ends up killing many of them as an expression of divine, if childish, judgment.

Although we can understand *why* the early Christians and subsequent church councils put Jesus in a divine straitjacket, a divine box, must we continue to define the contours of Jesus' identity in such a way that we inevitably sacrifice his humanity to divinity? Might we allow the possibility that in Jesus God demonstrates the potential for humans to be transformed into the likeness of God from one degree of glory to another and that such transformation not only is open to the *followers* of Jesus (2 Cor. 3:18) but was the path of *Jesus* as well?

#### BOXING GOD IN (PACKAGING A DIVINE JESUS)

Jesus began to be fitted for the confines of a divine straitjacket, out of which no mere human can escape, early on in Christian tradition. While the notion of a divine human had precedent particularly in Greek and Roman religious traditions, this was less clearly the case in Jewish religious tradition, though Judaism was familiar with angelic figures and holy men who mediated between God and mortals.<sup>23</sup> Shifts in Christological development went through many phases in the first few centuries, arriving at a kind of stable plateau with the resolutions of Nicaea (325 CE) and especially Chalcedon

needs, since his body was supported by holy power, but so that his companions might not entertain a false notion about him, as in fact certain men did later, namely that he had been manifested only in appearance. He himself was, and remained, untroubled by passion." *Stromateis* 6, 8–9, in H. Bettenson, *The Early Christian Fathers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956).

<sup>23</sup> On divine humans in ancient Greco-Roman and Jewish religiosity, see B. Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee* (New York: Harper-Collins, 2014), 11–83.

(451 CE) in the fourth and fifth centuries.<sup>24</sup> But, as Brian Daley noted in 2008, writing on modern perceptions of Christology in early Christianity, “Christology, in fact, has moved in the last century from being a theological topic which seemed safe and uncontroversial to an area of bitter controversy and uncertainty.”<sup>25</sup>

One such area of changing perceptions of the divine that seemed settled after Chalcedon, but on modern reflection has shifted in dramatic ways, involves the question about the suffering not only of Jesus (an obvious given), but of God as Father. In early Christian tradition the notion that God the Father could suffer was considered the heresy of Patripassianism (or Sabellianism, also linked to Modalism and to Monarchianism).<sup>26</sup> Sabellius was active as a theologian and priest in the first half of the third century, and he taught that God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were not three persons but were three aspects of one and the same God, different modes of God (hence the term “Modalism”). As a result, from this perspective, God the Father participated *de facto* in the suffering of Jesus. In Jesus, God the Father also died and was raised from the dead. By contrast, proto-orthodox theologians such as Tertullian and Hippolytus wrote against Sabellius, arguing that because God was eternal and unchanging God could not *suffer* anything, that God was *impassible*, unchanging. To suggest that God suffered was tantamount to saying that God could change.<sup>27</sup> If God was subject to change, then God was neither all-powerful nor very reliable. Thus, Hippolytus and Tertullian kept God the Father above the scandal of human suffering and death by agreeing with developing Trinitarian theology that located all divine suffering in the person of Jesus, the second person of the divine trinity, the sacrificial Son of God. But Sabellius opposed a Trinitarian formulation that saw the one God as consisting of three persons (Father, Son, Holy Spirit). According to Sabellius, God was truly one, and the idea of

<sup>24</sup> See A. Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition: From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon (451)*, 2nd rev. ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1988).

<sup>25</sup> “Christ and Christologies,” in S.A. Harvey and D.G. Hunter, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 886–905 (887).

<sup>26</sup> See J.K. Mozley, *The Impassability of God: A Survey of Christian Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1926), 28–52; P.L. Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 91–100; Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, 153–157; and R.G. Weinandy, O.F.M., Cap., *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 83–112. Weinandy argues for the impassability of God, 261–282.

<sup>27</sup> See Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies*, Book IX.7, and Tertullian, “Against Praxeas,” III (c. 213 CE), where he lumps a certain Praxeas together with the teachings attributed to Sabellius: “By this Praxeas did a twofold service for the devil at Rome . . . he drove away prophecy, and . . . crucified the Father.”

three distinct persons (even if closely related) struck him as contrary to Scripture, which emphasized the unity of God. The oneness and unity of God was central, even if it meant that somehow God the Father suffered with God the Son.

Later theologians such as Theodore of Mopsuestia (c. 350–428 CE) and his student Nestorius (d. 451 CE) sought, by contrast, to preserve the unchanging nature of God even further by claiming that the divine and human natures of Jesus did not mix and that the person of Jesus consisted of both two persons and two natures (in each instance, one divine and one human).<sup>28</sup> Thus, when Jesus cried out on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?,” this cry of abandonment indicated that the divine part of Jesus had departed and ascended to the heavens, returning to God, for God cannot die. In this view, the human Jesus was left to die forsaken on the cross, and so bear the sins of many. This is how some early Christians sought to protect God from being seen as going through any kind of passion, so concerned were they to preserve the dignity and honor of the eternal and unchanging God. Whereas Sabellius was ruled a heretic for drawing too little a distinction between God as Father and God as Son, both Theodore and Nestorius were subsequently ruled heretical for making too great a distinction between God the Father and God the Son.

Today, however, it is commonplace for Christian theologians to maintain both a strong Trinitarian confession and yet at the same time speak of the suffering of God as Father in addition to the suffering of God’s son on the cross. The notion of a cruciform Spirit is also an important aspect of much Christian spirituality. In this way contemporary Christian theology has drawn God closer to the human experience of suffering and alienation, as represented in the person of Jesus, rather than portraying God as aloof and distant, undisturbed by suffering.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> On Theodore and Nestorius, see J. Quasten, *Patrology* (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1983), vol. 3: 401–423, 514–519; F.A. Sullivan, *The Christology of Theodore of Mopsuestia* (Rome: Gregorian University, 1956); Kevin McNamara, “Theodore of Mopsuestia and the Nestorian Heresy,” *ITQ* 42 (1952): 254–278, and 43 (1953): 172–191; F.G. McLeod, S.J., “Theodore of Mopsuestia Revisited,” *TS* 61 (2000): 447–480; and F. Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 261–297.

<sup>29</sup> See, e.g., Jurgen Moltmann’s classic *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 200–290; M. J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul’s Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001); M. J. Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009); and especially P.S. Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

This doctrinal development is but one example demonstrating that Christian faith is not a static and unchanging faith and that one era's heresy can become another era's orthodoxy (and vice versa).<sup>30</sup> Our perceptions of God, of Jesus, and of the guidance of the Spirit are dynamic and develop in relation to our own experiences of change and growth. While we rightly cling tightly to the generative stories about God's relationship with Israel and Jesus, our interpretations of these generative narratives develop in relation to changing times and experiences that shape and reshape our understandings of what it means to be people of faith. Thus, for example, it has become common to speak of pre-Holocaust and post-Holocaust theology, because the Holocaust was so unfathomable an experience of the suffering and death of the Jews, God's own covenant people, that it has forced Christians and Jews alike to reevaluate theological claims about God in the aftermath of Auschwitz.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, fundamental reevaluations of traditional Christian beliefs are part and parcel of the developing character of the Christian faith, from the first generation of Christians to the controversies of the Christological councils in the fourth and fifth centuries to the systematizing of Christian doctrine from Augustine to Aquinas, the Reformation movements led by Luther and Calvin, the modernist controversy of the early twentieth century, the movements of the social gospel and liberation theology, the turns toward fundamentalism and evangelical revivalism of the late twentieth century, and beyond. The Roman Catholic Church asserts unity amid tremendous diversity, and the myriad Protestant denominations manifest incredible theological diversity amid various common underlying bonds. Such patterns have ever been so, and there is no reason to think such developments will

<sup>30</sup> See the classic work of W. Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971; originally published in 1934). See also the rebuttal by H.E.W. Turner, *The Pattern of Christian Truth: A Study in the Relations Between Orthodoxy and Heresy in the Early Church* (London: Mowbray, 1954).

<sup>31</sup> The events of the Holocaust are widely seen as a fundamental cause of the Roman Catholic Church's theological reevaluation of the status of non-Christian Jews in such formative documents as Vatican II's *Nostra Aetate* (1965), which for the first time declared that the Jews were not responsible for the death of Jesus. See J. Connelly, *From Enemy to Brother: The Revolution in Catholic Teaching on the Jews, 1933–1965* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012). See also, e.g., S.G. Hall, *Christian Anti-Semitism and Paul's Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993); M. Sweeney, *Reading the Hebrew Bible After the Shoah: Engaging Holocaust Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2008); J.S. Siker, "Abraham, Paul, and the Politics of Christian Identity," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 16:1 (2009): 56–70; and S. Katz, ed., *Wrestling with God: Jewish Theological Responses During and After the Holocaust* (New York: Oxford, 2007).

ever have an end. The debates over what is essential and what is not will continue as each new generation of Christians seeks to adapt its traditions to new and changing times.<sup>32</sup>

Christian tradition has in many respects used certain creeds and confessions to maintain a relatively static and constant rule of faith over the ages (or at least the appearance of unchanging faith). While this has worked perhaps in form, it has not worked in the substance of faith. We have already seen, for example, how the doctrine of the virgin birth of Christ has been championed by some as essential to the Christian tradition, while others have concluded that not only is it not central to Christian confession, but in fact, it actually gets in the way by dehumanizing Jesus. Each Sunday Christians of various stripes confess their belief in the virgin birth, but truth be told it is not something they would lose much sleep over if it fell out of the creed. Even as they mouth the traditional words, many of the faithful no longer actually believe what they are saying. Are they being disingenuous? No, they are reflecting how changing contexts of Christian faith result in changing understandings and expressions of the faith. And this applies not only to such vestiges as the virgin birth but to many other aspects of the tradition as well, especially regarding understandings of Jesus' death and atonement theology.

As noted in a number of recent books on problems with atonement theology, from a broad theological spectrum, such classic theories as penal substitution and substitutionary atonement have proven to create more theological dilemmas in modern reflection than they solve, even though we can understand the contexts in which they arose. From the perspectives of various forms of liberation theology, as well as the impact of René Girard's work on sacred violence, the notion of Jesus' death as somehow atoning for human sin has become increasingly difficult to contemplate in constructive terms in this postmodern world.<sup>33</sup> Even relatively conservative evangelical scholars have felt the need to recalibrate and adapt atonement theology to changing understandings and an emphasis on the metaphorical character of atonement

<sup>32</sup> One only has to look at the dramatic shifts in Christian teaching on homosexuality over the last fifty years to understand just how quickly theological stances and rationales can change. See, e.g., J.S. Siker, ed., *Homosexuality and the Church: Both Sides of the Debate* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), and, more recently, M. Vines, *God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same-Sex Relationships* (New York: Convergent Books/Random House, 2014).

<sup>33</sup> See R. Daly's overview and critique of sacrificial atonement in Christian history: *Sacrifice Unveiled: The True Meaning of Christian Sacrifice* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), and J.D. Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*.

language.<sup>34</sup> Still, the notion that Jesus' death was on behalf of sinners, and that this death served a reconciling and atoning purpose within God's salvific plan, has remained the predominant explanatory metaphor within Christian tradition for articulating the significance of the death of Jesus in light of his resurrection.

This is perhaps seen nowhere better than in Anselm's classic treatise *Cur Deus Homo* (Why God Became Human). According to Anselm, Jesus satisfied the offended honor of God on behalf of sinful humanity by paying the penalty for sin – death – in the place of humanity.<sup>35</sup> After Anselm (1033–1109), his slightly later contemporary Peter Abelard (1079–1142) rejected Anselm's explanation of atonement and offered another instead. Abelard's proposal has come to be termed the “moral influence” or “exemplary” model of understanding the significance of Jesus' death. In Abelard's view, Jesus' death was exemplary of God's love for humanity, and so should motivate us to reciprocate with love for both God and neighbor. In his commentary on Romans 3 Abelard writes, “How very cruel and unjust it seems that someone should require the blood of an innocent person as a ransom, or that in any way it might please him that an innocent person be slain, still less that God should have so accepted the death of his Son that through it he was reconciled to the whole world.”<sup>36</sup> With this criticism of Anselm's theory of “satisfaction atonement” in view, Abelard goes on to posit a more positive understanding of Christ's atoning work:

[I]t seems to us that in this we are justified in the blood of Christ and reconciled to God, that it was through this matchless grace shown to us that his Son received our nature, and in that nature, teaching us both by word and by example, persevered to the death and bound us to himself even more through love, so that when we have been kindled by so great a benefit of divine grace, true charity might fear to endure nothing for his sake . . . Therefore, our redemption is that supreme love in us through the Passion of Christ, which not only frees us from slavery to sin, but gains for us the

<sup>34</sup> See S. McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement: Living Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007).

<sup>35</sup> See R.W. Southern, *St. Anselm: A Portrait in a Landscape* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 197–227; R. Gorringe, *God's Just Vengeance: Crime, Violence and the Rhetoric of Salvation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 85–103; and M. Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 297–302.

<sup>36</sup> Peter Abelard, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, in the *Fathers of the Church* series, Medieval Continuation; trans. S. Cartwright (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2011), Book 2.117 (p. 167). The comment is on Rom. 3:21–26.

true liberty of the sons of God, so that we may complete all things by his love rather than by fear.<sup>37</sup>

While Abelard has no doubts that Jesus was truly sinless, the death of Jesus does not serve some legal satisfaction of an offended God, but instead reveals the depth of God's love for humanity through Christ. As Robert Daly has stated, for Abelard "the change that results from the loving death of Christ is not something that takes place in God; the change takes place in the subjective consciousness of sinners."<sup>38</sup>

What remains clear regarding theologizing about the death of Jesus from Christian origins through Abelard, Anselm, Augustine, and the whole Christian alphabetical list of theologians to the present day is that changing Christologies, and especially changing and developing atonement theologies, is a never-ending process. Whereas once it was inconceivable to imagine God enduring suffering, now it is almost equally inconceivable to imagine that God does not suffer with and in not just the human experience but all of creation. All attempts to box God into some eternal conceptual framework is doomed from the start, for our own contexts and perceptions as humans are ever changing, including our perceptions of God. How could it not be so? We turn, then, to the fundamental way in which we both speak and do not speak about God, not to second-order doctrinal statements about God, but to the primary language that we employ: metaphors. As I will argue below, if we fail to understand the metaphorical character of calling Jesus the sinless "lamb of God" (John 1:36), the perfect "High Priest" (Heb. 4–5), the "paschal lamb" (1 Cor. 5:7), whom God made "to be sin who knew no sin" (2 Cor. 5:21), to blend metaphors, we risk fossilizing and ontologizing such metaphors into doctrinal statements that lose their real efficacy.

#### FROM METAPHOR TO ONTOLOGY

Metaphorical language has always been central to how we speak about God, because at best we can speak only indirectly about God with images that are suggestive of our relationship with God. The parables of Jesus provide many of these metaphors within the Christian tradition: God the Father, God the farmer, God the householder, God the pruner of the vineyard, God the woman in search of a lost coin, God the shepherd. Metaphors abound in

<sup>37</sup> Peter Abelard, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, Book 2.117–118 (pp. 167–168).

<sup>38</sup> *Sacrifice Unveiled*, 114. See also the chapter entitled "Abelard and Anselm" in J. Marenbon, *Abelard in Four Dimensions* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 91–116, and Gorringe, *God's Just Vengeance*, 108–114.



describing the identity of Jesus: Jesus the slain lamb, Jesus whose blood washes away sin, Jesus the High Priest, the Passover lamb, the bread of life, the light of the world, the resurrection and the life, and so on.

In reflecting on the sinlessness of Jesus I have become convinced that “sinlessness” is really at best a kind of metaphor to describe a life patterned by faithful obedience to God and faithful relationships with others. But metaphors cease to have life when they become fossilized and turned into some kind of literal ontological statement about divine or cosmic reality, as if we ever have a vantage as humans to render such eternal verdicts. As Sallie McFague has noted, a metaphor places two things in comparative relationship, trying to say what one thing is by referring to another thing.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, in his seminal study of metaphorical language, *Metaphors We Live By*, the cognitive linguist George Lakoff states, “The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another.”<sup>40</sup> So, in this light, what does it mean to understand Jesus as “sinless”? To say Jesus is “sinless” is to say that he is human, but not human in every way; it is also to say that he is divine, but not divine in every way. To say Jesus is “sinless” is to juxtapose “humanity” and “sin” in a fundamental way. That humans are sinful is not news to anyone. But to say that a particular human, Jesus, is sinless – well, now *that’s* something! That is part of what it means to understand Jesus as a metaphor of God and God’s relationship to humanity. Again, to invoke McFague, “What must always be kept in mind is that the parables as metaphors and the life of Jesus as a metaphor of God provide characteristics for theology: a theology guided by them is open-ended, tentative, indirect, tensive, iconoclastic, transformative.”<sup>41</sup> And what could be more iconoclastic than the notion of a perfectly sinless human being? But when such an idea becomes a fixed doctrine, it becomes rigid – a dead metaphor that loses its power. Ironically, the very doctrines that have become so fixed in Christian theology as ontological truths are often undermined by the teaching of the Jesus in whom they purport to be grounded. This is not particularly surprising, because the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus calls into question the fundamental human desire to make definitive, direct, and timeless claims about God and God’s activity in the world. This is partly the implication of what the Apostle Paul says when he describes the cross as foolishness and

<sup>39</sup> *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 15–16. The greatest danger to metaphor is assimilation – “the shocking, powerful metaphor becomes trite and accepted” (p. 41).

<sup>40</sup> G. Lakoff and M. Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 5.

<sup>41</sup> *Metaphorical Theology*, 19.

weakness to those outside the faith (1 Cor. 1:18–25), but to those who “get it,” the cross exemplifies the power and wisdom of God. The cross is fundamentally destabilizing, both literally and metaphorically. It is literally the way of death, yet also the way of life transformed and redeemed.

Another aspect of metaphor important for the consideration of Jesus as sinless is the “is and is not” character of metaphor, so important in the work of Ricouer and McFague.<sup>42</sup> To say, for example, that a city is a “concrete jungle” helps us to understand cities in a new light by juxtaposing something that is very familiar in cities, concrete, with something that seems rather foreign to cities, a jungle. And yet by superimposing the imagery of “jungle” onto the completely mundane image of “concrete” this tensive metaphor creates an effective and new way of understanding a city. A city has lots of concrete, yet like a jungle it is thick and dense with tall trees, all kinds of animals and insects, and it can be hot and sticky. A city “is and is not” a concrete jungle, but the juxtaposition of images conveys something meaningful about a city that is not communicated in another way. Like a jungle a city can be dark and foreboding. And yet precisely because a city is made up of so much concrete, it is nothing like a jungle in that cities have relatively little vegetation.

When applying the “is and is not” character of metaphors to the notion of “the sinless Jesus,” what stands out is the juxtaposition of sinlessness with any human being. To be human is to sin – “To err is human,” or “Everyone makes mistakes,” as the slogans go. But while the Bible regularly refers to various individuals as righteous in the eyes of God, and Paul can refer to himself as “blameless” under the law (Phil. 3), the notion of a “sinless human” is a contradiction in terms. In Christian tradition the uniqueness of Jesus as “sinless” is what sets him apart and allows him to bear the sins of others, and hence atone for their sins. Or so the logic goes. To refer to “the sinless Jesus” casts Jesus in a new light in view of his death and resurrection. “God made him to be sin who knew no sin” (2 Cor. 5:21). From this vantage Jesus is both sinless and can stand in for sinners. He “becomes” sin, and so completely identifies with human sinfulness, yet he “knew no sin,” because he never did anything that was morally wrong, as the Christian tradition asserts. And so we circle back to what it means to be truly human.

<sup>42</sup> See P. Ricouer, *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 213–214, 298–299; McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 19, 23, 28. On Ricouer’s discussion of metaphor, see K. Simms, *Paul Ricouer* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 61–78, and J. Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 86–90.

When we assert the sinlessness of Jesus we suspend his full humanity, at least insofar as he is like us truly *in every respect*, because “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). We try to claim that he is just like us, but then add a qualifier that nullifies the primary claim: he is like us in every respect, except for sin. But it is really very simple, paradox notwithstanding. Jesus is either human or he is not. If he is human, then he experiences what all humans experience, including the web of human relationships and emotions related to sin. Thus one consequence of the full humanity of Jesus, from this vantage, is that traditional incarnational Christology proves problematic in the extreme.<sup>43</sup>

And yet, another way to view the claim for the sinlessness of Jesus is to move away from classical incarnational theology with its Trinitarian ontology and toward the embrace of a retrospective theology that envisions the life of Jesus as embodying not an ideal but an actual humanity that bends toward what we might call, given the poverty of our language, a pattern of *transgressive faithfulness* that redefines both faith and sin.<sup>44</sup> It is a pattern of life that moves away from conventional and traditional moralistic notions of sin. It is a transgressive faithfulness that crosses boundaries and in the process makes us intensely uncomfortable, for it links the perfecting of faith with ways that Jesus transgressed traditional understandings of family,

<sup>43</sup> S. McFague has made a similar point. She characterizes her work on metaphorical theology as coming out of “a post-Enlightenment, Protestant, feminist perspective, a perspective which I would characterize as skeptical, relativistic, prophetic, and iconoclastic. It is more aware of the discontinuities between God and the world than of the continuities . . . For instance, I have not found it possible as a contemporary Christian to support an incarnational Christology or a canonical Scripture: nevertheless, I have found it possible to support a ‘parabolic’ Christology and Scripture as the Christian ‘classic.’” *Metaphorical Theology*, viii. My own perspective, it will come as no surprise, resonates strongly with that of McFague.

<sup>44</sup> Kenneth Burke’s famous “definition of man” comes to mind here: “Man is the symbol-using (symbol-making, symbol-misusing) animal, inventor of the negative (or moralized by the negative), separated from his natural condition by instruments of his own making, goaded by the spirit of hierarchy (or moved by the sense of order), and rotten with perfection.” The last phrase, “rotten with perfection,” echoes my own sense of Jesus as “perfect sinner.” Burke’s point was that human striving to be more than one is leads individuals to an Aristotelian “entelechy,” namely, that each being “aims at the perfection natural to its kind.” But whereas a stone or a tree already is all that it needs to be a stone or a tree (the weathering of a stone or the growth of a tree notwithstanding), human striving toward perfection, to be more than one is, inevitably is fraught with danger and failure, even the destruction of humanity (e.g., the Nazi version of the Jew). Borrowing from Burke, to imagine Jesus as “perfect” makes sense to me only insofar as, like all other humans, Jesus too is “rotten with perfection.” See Kenneth Burke, “Definition of Man,” in *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 3–24 (16–17).

friends, and faith. This very real life has served as an idealized pattern of faithful response. But we are quick both to divinize it beyond our reach and to domesticate it into a banal and polite existence that loses its edges, accommodating the status quo rather than paradoxically letting go of life as a way of finding it. The letting go of life takes us back to Philippians 2 and Paul's hymn to the kenotic Christ whose sinful faith leads to death and whose death leads to life, because with God all things are possible.

#### FROM KENOSIS TO THEOSIS

The language of *theosis*, divinization or deification, has a long history especially within the branches of Eastern Orthodox Christianity.<sup>45</sup> But it can also be traced back to the origins of Christianity, and even its early Jewish contexts. For example, the Apostle Paul refers to Jesus being “declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead” (Rom. 1:4).<sup>46</sup> Here Paul appeals to an early Christian

<sup>45</sup> See especially N. Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), and N. Russell, *Fellow Workers with God: Orthodox Thinking on Theosis* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2009). M. Nisipel has noted, “It is a curiosity to note the large place occupied by the concept of salvation as deification in the theology of the Greek fathers and at the same time how little attention western scholarship has given to this idea.” “Christian Deification and the Early *Testimonia*,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 53 (1999): 289–304 (289). See also V. Karkkainen, *One with God: Salvation as Deification and Justification* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004), 17–36 on Eastern Orthodoxy, and 67–86 on Baptist and Methodist traditions of deification; S. Finlan and V. Kharlamov, eds., *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology*, vol. 1 (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2006); and V. Kharlamov, ed., *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology*, vol. 2 (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011). Two classic articulations of the notion of *theosis* have been expressed by Irenaeus and by Gregory of Nazianzus. In his *Against Heresies*, Book 5, Preface, Irenaeus states that Jesus “became what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself.” The fourth-century Cappadocian Gregory of Nazianzus, wrote: “He who gives riches becomes poor, for he assumes the poverty of my flesh, that I may assume the richness of his Godhead” (*Oratione* 38.13, “*In Theophania*,” ed. and trans. C. Moreschini and P. Gallay, *Sources Chrétiennes* [Paris: Cerf, 1990]), and famously in Letter 101 against the Apollinarians: “For that which he has not assumed he has not healed; but that which is united to his Godhead is also saved” (ed. and trans. P. Gallay, *Sources Chrétiennes* [Paris: Cerf, 1974]). See T.T. Tollefsen, “*Theosis* According to Gregory,” in J. Børtnes and T. Hägg, eds., *Gregory of Nazianzus: Images and Reflections* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2006), 257–270.

<sup>46</sup> See also R. Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 104: “At the core of the original confession, therefore is the affirmation of Jesus as the traditional Davidic Messiah, who was adopted and enthroned as the Son of God on the basis of his resurrection” (p. 104). See also B. Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God*, 218–225. On Paul's development of holiness as *theosis*, see M. Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 105–128, 161–173.

confession that identifies the resurrection of Jesus as the point where he is declared to be Son of God. Theosis, or divinization, initially comes with his resurrection, not with his birth. The notion of divinization itself, we must remember, is a metaphor that imagines humans being transformed fully into the image of God, an image that was lost or corrupted with the introduction of human sin into Eden.<sup>47</sup> In this way human sinfulness gives way ultimately to human perfection or, perhaps better, perfecting – and thus emphasizes the process along the way rather than only the end result. Such a process of transformation can be seen, for example, in 2 Corinthians 3:18, where Paul writes: “And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed [*metamorphoumetha*] into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.” Here Paul envisions a progressive transformation of believers into the image of the perfected Christ.<sup>48</sup> The key point, however, in light of Romans 1, remains that Jesus becomes divinized retrospectively in view of his resurrection from the dead.<sup>49</sup> From the Christian perspective, this deification is certainly in keeping with the pattern of faithfulness exemplified in Jesus’ life. In this respect Jesus’ divinization is not unlike that of others before and after him in both pagan and Christian contexts, because deification was “associated with the acquisition of virtue through noble conduct.”<sup>50</sup> What distinguished Jesus from all others before and after him, of course, was the Christian claim that God had raised him from the dead precisely as a *crucified* messiah. And so both his death and resurrection became the focus of his divinization that was then retrojected back on his life as a whole, back to his birth, and eventually to preexistence with God. This process resulted in

<sup>47</sup> As N. Russell has noted, “deification language is most often used metaphorically. The implications of the metaphor were clear to its first hearers or readers and did not need to be spelled out, the context of the utterance enabling them to construe its meaning. But by the sixth century the metaphorical sense was fading. Deification was becoming a technical term susceptible of definition. That is to say, the same truth which was originally expressed in metaphorical language came in the early Byzantine period to be expressed conceptually and dogmatically.” *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, 1.

<sup>48</sup> See D. Litwa, “2 Corinthians 3:18 and Its Implications for *Theosis*,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 2:1 (2008): 117–133.

<sup>49</sup> See M. Gorman, “Romans: The First Christian Treatise on Theosis,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 5:1 (2011): 13–34.

<sup>50</sup> Russell, *Fellow Workers with God*, 57. The discussion of deification can also be connected to the longstanding debate over the “divine man” in antiquity. See the classic work of L. Bieler, *Theios Aner: Das Bild des göttlichen Menschen in Spätantike und Frühchristentum* (reprint, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1967), as well as C. Holladay’s reservations about a “divine man” theology in Hellenistic Judaism of late antiquity, *Theios Aner in Hellenistic Judaism: A Critique of the Use of This Category in New Testament Christology* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977).

Christian theologians reflecting in particular on the incarnation of God in Jesus, and hence the self-emptying of God (*kenosis*) that led directly to the glorification of the divine Jesus (*theosis*) by means of resurrection from the dead. Thus, although the chronological movement of the Jesus narrative goes from birth to death and resurrection (from *kenosis* to *theosis*), the logic in fact moves from *theosis* to *kenosis*. Namely, the origins of Jesus in God come to their fullest expression only in light of the conviction that God had raised a faithful Jesus from the dead (Phil. 2:5–11), from which point it was a relatively straight path to locate Jesus as the heavenly divine Son who became God’s incarnate Word.

The language of divinization as applied to both Jesus and later to his followers found resonance as Christians reflected on two key biblical passages: Psalm 82:6 (81:6 in the Septuagint) and 2 Peter 1:4. Psalm 82:6 in particular was an important proof text for divinization in early Christian contexts. The passage reads: “I say, ‘You are gods, children of the Most High, all of you’” (*ego eipa theoi este kai huioi hypsistou pantes* – which in the Septuagint version is Ps. 81:6).<sup>51</sup> We find the earliest reference to this passage in the Gospel of John 10:30–36, where Jesus himself is portrayed as quoting this Psalm in defense of his claim to be sent by God into the world as the Son of God. Jesus said:

“The Father and I are one.” The Jews took up stones again to stone him. Jesus replied, “I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these are you going to stone me?” The Jews answered, “It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you, but for blasphemy, because you, though only a human being, are making yourself God.” Jesus answered, “Is it not written in your law, ‘I said, you are gods’? If those to whom the word of God came were called ‘gods’ – and the scripture cannot be annulled – can you say that the one whom the Father has sanctified and sent into the world is blaspheming because I said, ‘I am God’s Son’?”

Not only the Gospel of John, but the early Greek fathers, including Justin Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyons, and Clement of Alexandria, also made extensive use of this Psalm.<sup>52</sup> While John’s Gospel employed the Psalm to argue for the

<sup>51</sup> The very next verse, however – Ps. 82:7 – reminds humanity of its mortal status: “Nevertheless, you shall die like mortals, and fall like any prince.” Early rabbinic tradition saw Ps. 82:6 as addressed either to Adam and Eve when they fell into sin or to the Israelites in the desert when they committed idolatry by worshiping the golden calf. See the discussion in Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, 100–101.

<sup>52</sup> See the discussion in Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, 99–110, and Russell, *Fellow Workers with God*, 56–64.

divine identity of Jesus, Justin, Irenaeus, and Clement utilized Psalm 82:6 to address the status of believers as being on the path to divinization, whether through obedience to Christ (so Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 123), through baptismal adoption by God (so Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.6.1; 3.19.1), or through attaining the likeness of God by means of the Spirit (so Clement, *Stromateis*, 2:125.4–5).<sup>53</sup>

The text of 2 Peter 1:4 also inspired a great deal of reflection on the character and process of deification among believers. The text reads: “Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature [*hina dia toutōn genēsthe theas koinōnoi phuseōs*].” The notion of becoming participants or partakers of the divine nature led various early Christians, most notably Cyril of Alexandria (c. 376–444 CE), to see in this text a clear reference to the process of the deification of believers, with Jesus as the point of intersection between human and divine.<sup>54</sup> In this view Christians move toward deification through their connection with Christ. Because the risen Christ participates with God, so can Christians through their baptismal faith participate with Christ as a proxy for God.<sup>55</sup>

#### FROM THEOSIS TO RETROSPECTIVE SINLESSNESS

What is the significance of this brief discussion of theosis in early Christian theology for our larger exploration of the sinlessness of Jesus? To put it directly, the earliest followers of Jesus came to believe in his divinization only in light of their conviction that God had raised him from the dead, to their complete and utter surprise. As we have seen, this belief in his resurrection forced a radical reinterpretation of his death. It was no longer a tragic death of another prophet; rather, it was an atoning death for human sin (Matt., Mark, John, Paul, Heb.); it was the death of a martyr vindicated by God in resurrection (Luke); it was the death of an obedient servant of God who was faithful to his call even in the face of death (Paul). These interpretations of

<sup>53</sup> See Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, 99–110. On the Christological use of Ps. 82:6, see also Nisipel, “Christian Deification and the Early *Testimonia*,” 291–304.

<sup>54</sup> See in particular the collection of studies in M.J. Christensen and J.A. Wittung, eds., *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007).

<sup>55</sup> See Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Fathers*, 191–204, and Russell, *Fellow Workers with God*, 65–69.

his death, especially as an atoning sacrifice, led in turn to the retrospective evaluation of his ministry, his baptism, and his birth, conforming the whole of Jesus' life to the explanatory power of faith in the crucified messiah whose resurrection pointed to his divine identity all along. Thus the divinization that came with his resurrection was transferred back through his life to his birth and eventually to his preexistent divine origins. We have seen all of this in the images of Jesus that emerge from the earliest Christian writings.

But what if we imagine the life of Jesus apart from the retrospective vantage of a crucified messiah raised from the dead? If we take the humanity and the human development of Jesus seriously, without immediately smothering it in a divine identity born of resurrection, I would argue that a more dynamic and honest image of Jesus emerges. If we imagine Jesus' life in terms of theosis, of Jesus himself being transformed, as Paul characterized, from one degree of glory to another, a very real Jesus comes into view. It is far more tangible to imagine Jesus as a person whose life took him on a progressive journey of holiness, rather than a perfect human who could do no wrong from the day that his mother Mary brought him into this world. What had Luke said? That Jesus was obedient to his parents after the Temple incident when he was twelve years old and that he grew in wisdom and years (Luke 2:51–52). I would argue – although it is certainly far from what Luke likely intended – that this permits the notion of a Jesus who learned and developed, who made mistakes, who failed and then tried again, and who lived the human struggle not because he was divine from birth but because he was a human being who sought God in community with others.<sup>56</sup> This is the idea of a Jesus who was moved to identify with the baptism of John. Is it so far-fetched to imagine a human Jesus feeling the need and desire to repent of his sins and dedicate his life to God? This is a Jesus who grows into a sense of his ministry and vocation as one called by God, a Jesus who learns to develop his own prophetic voice. In short, in my view we need to imagine a human Jesus who was convinced that he was on a path toward God, and out of that conviction he invited disciples along this path. This path toward God would lead him in the direction of discerning his vision of righteous justice over against many of the traditions and presumptions of the day regarding what it meant to be a person of faith, as well as what it meant to be a sinner.

<sup>56</sup> See, e.g., J. Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought* (London: SCM Press, 1990), who writes: "Sinlessness . . . must be understood in a dynamic fashion . . . His 'sinlessness,' in spite of the negative formation of the word, consisted in his highly affirmative overcoming of the distance [from God], his deepening union with the Father through the deeds and decisions of his life, in which he overcame sin. I would not hesitate to call this a progressive incarnation in the life of Jesus" (p. 398).



This human Jesus was surely an inspired individual, burning with a passion for God, and with a passionate vision for a revitalized community that often put him at odds with various authorities. While Jesus no doubt agreed with many of the fundamental convictions of the Jewish religious leaders of his day, he also found himself engaged in deep controversy about the meaning of family, about what it means to befriend the disreputable in society, and about the meaning of faith and maintaining fidelity to God's covenant with Israel. Is it so threatening to imagine a human Jesus who walks on such a path toward God, a Jesus whom others experienced as among the most profound and yet troubling teachers they had encountered? In short, we need to suspend our mythic deification of Jesus from birth for one moment in order to hear the human voice of one who felt called by God as had the prophets of old and who himself called others along his very messy and transgressive path.

#### JESUS THE PERFECT SINNER

The divinization of Jesus by virtue of his resurrection and the subsequent retrospective theologizing that dominated reflection on his life and death is the age-old story of Christian faith and tradition with all of its permutations. We have seen how one central aspect of such theological reflection led fairly early on to the understanding of Jesus not only as God's messiah but as God's sinless messiah, and ultimately as "very God of very God," to borrow a phrase from the fourth-century Nicene Creed. But the task of speaking about God, of theologizing, is never complete. We may reach various plateaus along the way, but we are never done. If we think we have arrived, it is certainly a sure sign that we have not. So we continue to reflect on the foundational Scriptures and on the great variety of traditions all filtered through human reason and experience, and such reflection leads us to imagine anew the dynamic presence of God through the life and ministry of Jesus, all animated by God's Spirit of grace amid the utter turmoil that defines so much of human existence. And we find ourselves trying to say again, afresh, who we are as God's people. It has been my task in this volume to suggest that part of engaging the presence of God within the Christian faith is to challenge the Christian tradition to truly embrace the full humanity of Jesus, sin and all, for only then do we see God's full and transformative embrace of the human condition, and our own call to do the same.

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